



Love and Anxiety During Two Pandemics

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Opening Six Chapters – September 2020

Chapter One – Two Love Stories Set One Century Apart

“December is crazy to drag you and the kid to some tiny island in Maine during a global pandemic,” said Long Beach City Councilman Larry van der Bix, entering his family’s elegant foyer, where an alabaster sculpture showed a female athlete glancing downward as sunlight bathed the centerpiece commissioned by King Christian Xth.

“I don’t even know if we’ll stay together,” said Lori Lewis, the athlete who the dork had literally bumped into on their first day at Woodrow Wilson high school.

“Won’t that be tough on the kid?” asked Larry, sifting through a massive keyring that included several giant ornaments made a hundred years earlier, for the arrival of a Danish ballerina to the family’s palatial Naples Island estate.

“He’s not even my kid,” said Lori, as she looked upward, above the foyer door, to the triangular display case that bore an American Flag which had been presented by General John J. Pershing – the head of the American Expeditionary Force – to honor the youngest Major in the U.S. Army – Larry’s great-grandfather, Carl van der Bix – for roaming hospitals for recovering aviators to help fly to victory “Over There” in the

“Great War” – called the “War to End All Wars,” but yet whose toll paled to the 100 million slain by the Spanish Flu, the most brutal killer ever to struck the Industrial Age.

“It gets cold in Maine,” warned Larry, flipping through his keys. “It snows!”

“December only cares about winning a free house,” said Lori, looking upward, “and all the kid’s done since COVID closed school is read my Dad’s *Sgt. Rock* comics.”

The Councilman’s cell phone buzzed and while the dork scanned a text message, Lori kept her eyes upward – *over there* – at the hundred-year-old Flag.

“My great-grandfather got that after Armistice Day,” proudly stated Larry, pointing to the American Flag, which was beside the red-and-white Dannebrog given to the ballerina, Astrid Ullagård, as a gift from King Christian Xth when the Dane risked the Spanish Flu to emigrate to America, to start her life in California with Carl van der Bix, the young aviator she had met in the dark days of Christmas 1918, when each crossed a continent shattered by war and gripped by a brutal pandemic.

“You say that every time,” said Lori, dropping her eyes onto her smart phone.

“Cuz it’s true,” said Larry, as his phone again buzzed.

“Don’t you have some Council meeting?” asked Lori.

“You matter more than the ‘Blinker Day’ debate,” said the dork, reading another message while leaning against the magnificent sculpture carved by Bertel Thorvaldsen. “No one likes my ideas anyway.”

“So neither of us gets what we want,” said Lori, the fifth generation of the Lewis family born in Long Beach.

“Is COVID why the marriage is falling apart?” asked Larry, the dork known only for using his massive lottery winnings to fund an absurd campaign for City Council, but who otherwise achieved little in life beyond a trust fund and his friendship with Lori.

“December’s so afraid that she’s invoking rank as a mom to demand we move,” said Lori, who unlocked the door to the suite that had been built on Naples to lure the ballerina to leave Europe. “Maybe I should come up with something other than the kid.”

“You ultimately lose when the defense against lying is more lies,” said the dork.

The two entered the room where the ballerina had spent hours each day in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors so as to teach ballet students or practice or perform for guests. Lori examined framed-but-yellowing newspaper clip that showed presidential candidate

Herbert Hoover watching the Danish ballerina perform during an August 1928 campaign appearance in Bixby Park.

“That’s my great-grandmother,” said the dork.

“And you tell me that, too,” said Lori, reading the sentences about Hoover’s speech before 100,000 attending the annual Iowa Day Picnic, and the single sentence that misspelled the name of Astrid Ullagård and inaccurately stated that she had danced for the King of England. Unmentioned about her departure from Copenhagen was six weeks spent traveling half the globe in close quarters on two steamships and several trains, until reaching Long Beach, a small-but-growing beach town incorporated just 30 years earlier.

“Stories are easy to remember when they’re true,” said the dork.

“It’s hard to look back when you’ve got no idea what the future holds,” said the championship athlete and decorated soldier.

“Well, maybe you need something *old* for something *new*,” said Larry, as he ruffled up his sleeves and – “presto!” – produced a huge ancient key.

“You are so weird, Larry,” said the swimmer-turned-soldier-turned-husband, taking the gift, “but you’re the only person I can tell that I’m afraid of divorce.”

“Maybe it’s okay to just know you’re afraid of the truth,” said the dork.

“There’s a difference between fear and the will to survive,” said the soldier.

“Or we can just listen to records,” said Larry, who walked to the Victrola 78-rpm phonographic disc player given as a wedding gift to Carl and Astrid.

As Lori studied ornate lettering on her new key, the dork cranked the handle and lowered the needle onto the thick disc spinning on the turntable, filling the suite with the ancient sound of Enrico Caruso.

* * *

On September 3rd 1918, U.S. Army Air Service Captain Carl van der Bix stood at the Victrola and squinted to the window, to see a gray sky over Paris. He yawned and lowered the needle, and the world’s greatest performer passionately struggled with English lyrics.

*Johnnie, get your gun
Get your gun, get your gun
Take it on the run
On the run, on the run
Hear them calling, you and me
Every son of liberty*

“Attention!” burst a voice, and every officer in the room jumped.

“At ease,” said General John J. “Blackjack” Pershing, entering the Officers Lounge, accompanied by a One Star General and a Bird Colonel. As the Italian singer sang “*Over There*,” the Supreme Commander of the American Expeditionary Force waved Carl van der Bix away from lifting the needle of the Victrola. “No need, Captain.”

Carl remained at attention as Pershing walked directly to the 28-year-old airman, who had begun flying in Jan 1910, after being dragged – along with his school friend, Earl Daugherty – by his stern father to the “Los Angeles International Aviation Meet” at Dominguez Field, where the Old Man ordered Carl and Earl to pass out flyers promoting the family’s Long Beach real estate business so as to help lure potential homebuyers from the massive crowds of wealthy tourists who had crossed the country by train or ship just to attend the first-in-America air show.

“How on earth did *he* become a Major?” mused Pershing, staring at the 88th American to have been issued a federal license to fly and one of the first to earn wings in the fledgling U.S. Army Air Service.

“Cuz he’s still alive after six years with an air rating,” said Colonel Oliver Spaulding, stepping forward, and extending a tiny box.

“Patrick and Mitchell say you’re one of the best in the Air Service,” said Pershing, opening the box and producing the gold leaf that signifies the rank of Major. “Spaulding needs an aide.”

* * *

As Caruso sang, the dork witnessed Lori Lewis – an NCAA champion swimmer, an Olympian, and a decorated combat soldier – display doubt.

“I don’t know if we’ll even make it to Maine,” said Lori.

Chapter Two – Over Here... Long Ago... Over There...

Major Carl van der Bix remained at attention and heard Enrico Caruso singing, but two days without sleep sent his mind far away from General John J. Pershing pinning a leaf.

* * *

“Wake up, Boy!” boomed what seemed the harsh voice of Carl’s father, known always as, the Old Man. “You’re working today.”

With a pitch-black sky over Belmont Shore, Carl van der Bix got dressed, donned his cap, and made his way to the kitchen, where the Old Man was packing printed fliers that advertised the family’s real estate business – “*California Living in Sunny Long Beach! – The v.d. Bix Land Co.*” – into a crate on a wagon. The lanky 19-year-old – now a high school graduate, but with no prospects beyond the family business – put four apples in the crate. The Old Man put placards, a folding table and one stool on the wagon and secure everything with twine.

The Old Man and Carl marching up Bayshore to Ocean Blvd, making their way through a newly-developed neighborhood, to reach the Pacific Electric Red Car.

“VeeBee!” yelled a voice, as Carl and the Old Man hoisted the wagon into the Red Car. “Are you going to the Air Show, too?”

Carl nervously smiled to his classmate, Earl Daugherty – also the son of a Long Beach real estate mogul – as the Old Man bought two tickets for the train line that had been laid specifically for the Dominguez Air Show.

“I’m gonna fly one’a those machines,” said Earl, climbing on board. “Gonna *git me* one!”

“Keep your mouth shut, Boy!” bellowed the Old Man, pushing his tall son away from Earl, and yanked him onto a seat.

Earl sat next to Carl, but neither spoke during the trip to downtown Long Beach.

“Who needs Coney Island?” said Earl, as the Red Car slowly passed The Pike, the second-most-popular pleasure zone in America. Carl looked beyond the roller coasters, to the enormous warships of the nation’s growing Pacific Fleet.

With a huge crowd waiting for the first train bound for the opening day of the Air Show, the Old Man relied on his gruff voice and cane to part the Red Sea. “Coming through...,” barked the mogul who had gotten rich by developing Naples Island and Belmont Shore. “Sickly child... Make room...” For those who wouldn’t step aside, the Old Man poked with his cane.

Inside the special train, Earl Daugherty again sat next to Carl. “Don’t you wanna fly?” whispered Earl, to Carl, who looked torn between orders and dreams. “Or... just... work?”

The Old Man scowled at his lanky son, before turning to the dashing young Daugherty. “You’re good enough looking to make rich women pause.”

The Red Car clattered as the two young men took orders.

“Remember, printing costs money, so never *hand* someone a flier,” ordered the Old Man. “Look ’em in the eyes and say, ‘*Considering a move to California?*’”

The two young men said nothing.

“Let ’em vote with their fingers!” demanded the tycoon responsible for much of the housing that had turned Long Beach into a direct competitor with Los Angeles. “Make ’em *take* it.”

The Red Car reached the terminus, at the ticket gate for the Dominguez Hills Air Show.

The Old Men leapt to be first out of the train, blocking the door until Carl and Earl could maneuver the wagon. As the two young men followed Carl’s father, both looked upward, to see aircraft of all shapes – biplanes and dirigibles and balloons and more – flying or floating above huge bleachers constructed for the event.

Carl stared at Glenn Curtis biplane circling the air field.

“I’m gonna *git me* one!” repeated Earl, dreaming of a bright future. “Bliss is waiting.”

Carl felt the sting of what seemed his father’s cane across the back of his thigh.

“Sir,” floated a distant voice, “Bliss is waiting.”

“Make sure VeeBee holds on to those fliers!” yelled an old voice.

* * *

The most popular song of its age played on.

Major Carl van der Bix shook his head to see himself being pinned by John J. Pershing, as he had not slept after being ordered off reconnaissance flights to support the 28th Infantry Division during brutal street fighting in Fismes, and ordered driven-not-flown to Paris, where he was ordered to clean his uniform and polish his boots, before a final order, to hurry up and wait for more orders.

“Sir,” said the One Star General accompanying Pershing, “General Bliss is waiting.”

“Colonel, make sure VeeBee holds on to those flyers,” said the AEF Supreme Commander, who then left the Officers Lounge with the One Star, before Enrico Caruso finished “*Over There*.”

“Been flying for *seven*, not six,” grumbled Carl. “Earl and me got licensed in ’11, not ’12.”

“It’s like relying on my kid to help assess the Air Service,” muttered Colonel Spaulding.

The Victrola finished “Over There.”

Carl’s eyes flickered, and again he saw life before the Great War, of sneaking away from Fort Mac to drive with Earl Daugherty, and of sleeping at his desk after early-morning barn dancing.

“Stop splitting time,” yelled Colonel Oliver Spaulding.

Instead, Carl saw his original commanding officer, Colonel David Arian, who had enlisted him at Fort MacArthur in 1911, after Earl and Carl had become among the first Americans to earn a federal license to fly. Carl shook his head, and again saw he was in Paris, in a nearly-empty Officers Lounge, and that Colonel Oliver Spaulding was yelling.

“Your job is to keep these pilots alive, not to barnstorm,” barked Spaulding, demanding that the exhausted Major not fly to the Air Service HQ in Champagne-Ardenne. “You’ll crash for sure.”

The Victrola began skipping.

“No Staff Officer of the Army Air Service sleeps on the job!” yelled Oliver Spaulding.

Major Carl van der Bix heard yelling, but stared instead at the ghost from Fort MacArthur.

The Victrola kept skipping.

“Stop dreaming, Major!” yelled Colonel Spaulding.

Carl watched the ghost of Colonel David Arian try but fail to lift the Victrola needle.

“Saint-Mihiel is no playground!” barked Colonel Spaulding.

Carl could only see David Arian, the ghost who got transferred to command Vermont’s 57th Pioneer Infantry and would become the highest-ranking Doughboy killed when the USS *Leviathan* originally carried the Spanish Flu to Europe.

“Van der Bix!” shouted the gray-haired Colonel. “VeeBee!”

Like a longshoreman making sure that an injury to one would not become the injury to all, Colonel David Arian sought to awaken the exhausted airman. Carl repeatedly blinked, as the ghost floated a waft of smoke, as though to mask his face, to warn that a Great War may end, but arriving was the more brutal killer to strike the Industrial Age.

“Downstairs in five minutes, Major!” ordered the furious Colonel Spaulding, storming out of the Officers Lounge.

Carl shook his head, as the ghost saluted the new Major and evaporated into the Paris sky.

* * *

“Behave like a Staff Officer when you take orders from the Supreme Commander,” said Colonel Oliver Spaulding, as each bounced on the backseat of the armored vehicle carrying them across the pockmarked roads of France. “You are *not* some circus performer!” Carl fell asleep.

* * *

Major Carl van der Bix climbed out of the motor vehicle that carried them to Chaumont.

“Took your sweet time, Major,” said General Billy Mitchell, the number two commander of the fledgling U.S. Army Air Service.

Mitchell unfolded a map and laid it across the hood.

Carl yawned as he produced a pencil and small notepad and began meticulously scrawling units assigned across the Western Front.

“The Air Service in the south is growing, so I’m sending you to the Marseille aerodrome,” said Billy Mitchell, handing Carl a clean map and a written order signed by John Pershing and witnessed by Mason Patrick. “Wave this at any big-headed bastard who gets in the way.”

* * *

“You’ve got a driver, two riflemen, and a junior officer,” said Colonel Oliver Spaulding, motioning to the armored car that had carried them to the Air Service HQ, at Champagne-Ardenne. “Assess the Air Service while you gather pilots from the hospitals during your drive to Marseille.”

“Carry additional flyers in *that*,” said Carl, pointing to the Davidson-Cadillac reconnaissance vehicle. “Five already will be tight.”

“You need both riflemen for the Colt-Browning M1895,” said Spaulding, pointing to two Privates loading ammunition into the vehicle, “but get the LT to round up more vehicles.”

“Fueled, Sir,” said a Sergeant in his 30s assigned to drive Carl to the only AEF aerodrome along the southern tip of the Western Front.

“Hey’a Major,” said a young aviator – the LT – balancing a large hand-cranked motion picture camera over his shoulder.

“How am I supposed to feed ’em?” said Carl.

“Be creative,” said the Colonel.

* * *

“How old are you, LT?” asked Major Carl van der Bix, as the Davidson-Cadillac armored vehicle rolled over a pockmarked road, alongside a forest of shattered trees and muddy fields, toward the rubble of a demolished town.

“Twenty-one, Sir,” said the aviator. “Earned my wings in San Diego.”

Carl turned to the two riflemen assigned to protect him. “When did you get here?”

“A month ago, Major,” said one rifleman.

Carl studied the bright faces of the two Privates. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen, Sir,” said each Doughboy.

“You’re just *babies*,” said the youngest Major in the U.S. Army.

The grim-faced driver – the oldest in the vehicle – slowed, as they approached a roadblock outside the only building left standing in a town demolished by the chaos of the Great War.

“Halt!” demanded an armed guard at the roadblock, ready to shoot.

“Moving a Major to the Front,” said the Sergeant, peering through the slit of a window, and extending his own written order.

The guard kept his rifle up while studying the sheet, as the other remained ready to shoot.

“Any food?” shouted the Major, to the two guarding the only erect building in the area.

“Stale bread, but not enough,” said the guard, returning the Sergeant’s written order.

“Chuck wagon comes tomorrow.” The guard motioned for the driver to keep moving. “Ain’t no livestock, no crops, no birds.”

“Plenty of rats, though,” sneered the other guard.

“Welcome to France, gentlemen,” said Carl van der Bix, as the driver lurched into first gear.

Chapter Three – COVID’s Just Another Word For Nothin’ Left To Lose

Lori Lewis heard knocking, donned a face mask, and opened the door to her now-emptied luxury beachfront apartment.

“Why, you must be the winner!” said a white woman in her 50s with wild hair and wearing a floral face mask, faded jeans and a hippy blouse with a Chicago Cubs patch sewn above her heart.

Six feet behind her and also wearing a mask stood a dashing young Black man sporting a shirt that read “*Do Your Maine Thing*” who nodded politely, seemingly to indicate that he was obviously resting a huge video camera on his buff shoulders.

“Wrong address,” said Lori, who looked at the Black man and started to close the door.

“No, Baby, the Maine Tourism Board sent them,” said December Carrera, who was placing an ornate latch-key around her son’s neck. “Our dream-come-true story about the essay contest will make people move to New England.”

The interviewer looking at the two beautiful white women, and to her cameraman, before focusing on December – a mom in her early 30s. The cameraman politely indicated that he was starting to shoot video.

“This is Karen J. Joplin, and I just rode as far from Maine as you can, and *still* be on the continental United States,” said the wild haired interviewer, her face mask bobbing with each word.

“Wait, I didn’t say ‘yes’ to anything,” said Lori Lewis, from whose family Long Beach had recruited five generations of sailors, soldiers and Marines.

The polite cameraman focused on December, as the interviewer extended the microphone.

“Why, *you* must be the lucky winner!” mechanically repeated Karen.

“We get the keys to the Harbor House Inn with my essay,” said December, joyfully.

“Dreams *can* come true!”

“No one asked *me*,” repeated the Olympian from Long Beach who had earned NCAA Best-in-Southern-California awards all four year swimming for Woodrow Wilson High School, where her best friend, Larry van der Bix, would drive her at 5 am each morning for practice.

“And just *look* at what Maine’s newest homeowners are giving up!” said Karen Joplin, brushing past Lori to impatiently lead the cameraman to the massive private patio with a beachfront view, and ordered video of the Queen Mary.

As the polite Black man shot video of the Pacific, his ring tone played the King Cole Trio.

“You really should prioritize time better,” said the wild-haired woman, walking inside as the man took a call.

“A buck a minute,” said the cameraman, nervously gazing before using the patio as a stage. “So the President takes a cheap seats on a British Airways flight...”

When the cameraman took off his mask to record comedy, Lori and December stared at his incredibly good-looking face while he told the story of hijackers cry and comfort each other, while the President slips on a face mask and Groucho glasses to hide.

“Not impressed by his choices, but even comedians need money during a pandemic,” shrugged Karen Joplin.

The cameraman delivered a punch line with an angry sword-carrying old Queen, smiled for the camera, thanked the called, hung up, and chuckled. “Definitely upload.”

“I needed a driver,” said Karen, “so at least he’s performed on tour for years.”

“Too bad he’s not funny,” said Lori.

“Sizzling hot, though,” whispered December, checking to see if her son was only reading.

The cameraman put on his mask and maintained social distance entering the living room. The three women watched the man walk toward the boy on the rug, who wore a latch-key chain. “Nice key.... I’m Andrel McGee.” The boy continued reading *Sgt Rock* and didn’t look up to the tall Black man.

“My goodness, I wonder who’s knocking?” said Karen Joplin, as she again swiftly brushed past Lori to follow December to the door.

“Excuse me, Ms. Lewis,” said the cameraman, as he politely passed Lori.

“What the fuck is going on?” said Lori, looking at a kid reading comics while her wife took command for a dream that will end everyone’s life in Long Beach.

“Don’t talk like that in front of our son,” said December, at the door.

The cameraman captured the door swinging open.

Even though Long Beach Councilman Larry van der Bix wore a face mask, he clearly jumped into “smiling-mode” – as any second-rate politician would do – to present a box of the Original Philippe’s sandwiches, pickles, coleslaw, soup, salad and pie in front of a polite camera.

“Get outta here, Larry!” barked Lori, pointing to the Maine duo. “COVID alert!”

Karen and Andrel each promised they had tested negative.

December looked miffed as would any unhappy wife. “My husband’s just being *silly*.”

* * *

The dork slid an Original Philippe's mustard bottle to Andrel McGee, as everyone sat in a wide circle on the huge balcony patio, with the Maine duo soaking up the late-May 2020 sunshine.

"And clean the bottle," said the 50ish hippy, pointing to packets of disinfectant wipes.

"Larry introduced us," said December, offering a sandwich to her disinterested husband.

Lori and Larry looked at one another nervously.

Unmentioned was the introduction had occurred because each woman agreed to go with Larry for a road trip to cash his lottery winnings, but neither knew the other had been invited, or did Lori get told that the dork had been December's biggest fan when she worked as a webcam diva.

* * *

The younger Larry settled into an upscale hotel leather recliner, as he watched December make final adjustments to her skin-tight clothing.

"I know we're driving with Soldier Girl to cash your Mega Millions," said December, "but my subscribers pay good money for this weekly show." The webcam stripper signaled for Larry to hold the camera, while she straddled his hips. "But here's a big perk for my biggest fan."

* * *

"Not every story needs to get told," said Lori, who used food from Original Philippe's to distract the duo from Maine, who each had surrendered to glorious late-May sunshine.

"And, uh, Larry just gave us that amazing key, as a symbol for our new life in Maine," said December, quickly turning toward her son, urging Riley to wag the ornate key. "Winning a new life together is the big story."

"May I?" asked Andrel, as he calmly pointed to Riley's latch-key chain.

"Don't *scare* the child," instructed Karen Joplin.

* * *

December – eye-poppingly beauty in her early twenties – welcomed fans to her weekly webcam, and then slowly slipped her thumbs under her clingy low-cut top. The diva sat squarely onto Larry, who began to gasp for breath as he struggled to shoot video in the hotel room. December pulled the clingy top down such that each breast slipped out with a silent "pop." Chatting with fans, she smiled warmly and moved her hands under her breasts, lifting, pressing, wagging, gripping and bouncing them.

Larry struggled, as December hovered above the camera. As huge breasts swung over him, Larry's hands twitched, causing the camera to jiggle. The dork began coughing.

"Turn off the volume," said December.

Larry just coughed more.

"Lots more to see, guys," said December, as she reached to the side of the camera to switch off the sound.

* * *

"Why, how interesting," said Karen Joplin, basking in sunshine.

Lori looked sternly to her wife.

"It doesn't matter *how* people meet, just that they stay together," said December, as she mechanically prepared a plate for her son.

"So you don't *want* an 'introduction story' for the interviews?" asked Karen.

"Maybe the key is a fun angle," added Andrel, again pointing to the giant key dangling around the nine-year-old's neck.

"This is not your interviewer," said the woman with wild hair.

"It's one of the keys my great-grandfather gave to his Danish ballerina wife a century ago to welcome her to America," said Larry, who watched the cameraman scrawl notes onto a tiny pad. "They met when he flew planes for the Army during World War One."

The hippy scowled.

"Thank you, Councilman, for being so helpful," said the cameraman, appearing surprised by the polite, detailed response.

December looked away from the duo from Maine to offer a plate to the nine-year-old.

"I don't eat land animals," said Riley Beach, rejecting the French dip roast beef sandwich, while eyeing various slices of pie that Larry had brought from Original Philippe's.

* * *

With the webcam running without audio, December leaned forward, her thighs wrapped completely around Larry's torso. He struggled to hold the webcam diva's camera. Gasping, Larry's eyes rolled back and he passed out.

The camera fell onto the recliner.

Lori opened the hotel room door and saw Larry passed out under a barely-clad December. Lori rushed to make sure Larry was alive. The camera continued shooting, as Lori pulled open his

mouth to check Larry's airway and breathing, before placing fingers against his neck for a pulse. The furious athlete-soldier turned to December.

Viewers of the 2010 webcam then watched – but could not hear – the two women battling one another, clearly yelling, arms swinging, and hands smacking.

December shoved the blonde away.

Lori soon pinned December on the floor, next to the camera.

As the blow-by-blow continued, a chat window on the computer showed subscribers cheering the blonde “AngryGirl” and the webcam's stripper diva.

Lori swung her hand.

“Nobody slaps me!” yelled December, catching the swing.

Loud grunting and slapping sounds awakened the dork, who saw two women wrestling. Lori's shredded shirt left each topless woman unwilling to stop fighting without total victory.

Seeing the camera still running, the dork smiled limply and closed his eyes.

* * *

“The Tourism Board told me this was about the essay contest,” said December.

The second-rate politician attempted to distract the debate by encouraged everyone to eat.

“Why'd you drive to downtown Los Angeles during a fucking pandemic for sandwiches?” muttered a soldier displaying little will.

“You can't get Philippe's *over there*,” replied Larry, playfully saluting, “... *over there*.”

Andrel politely looked to Karen for instruction.

The nine-year-old watched a silent showdown between four adults.

“My throat is burning!” gasped Andrel McGee, quickly drinking lemonade to offset the super-hot mustard spread across his roast-beef-and-cheddar French dip sandwich. He dipping the sandwich into *au jus*. “Why would anyone leave?”

Chapter Four – The Slog Through Surf City

“You never asked *me* about some fucking interviews,” growled Lori, as December climbed into the passenger side of a U-Haul van.

“Watch your language,” said December, as she slid in, beside Riley. “You’ve had *plenty* of interviews, since there wasn’t any COVID in your stupid Olympics.”

“So when does *my* opinion matter?” asked the husband.

“When good husbands win some medals at home,” replied the wife, who looked up as the due from Maine approached.

“Andrel, you should know better,” growled Karen Joplin, as the interviewer approached the U-Haul parked outside the beachfront apartment. “We do not ‘hitch a ride’ for obvious reasons.”

“I stay cool if there’s tension,” said the out-of-work comedian.

The woman in her 50s with wild hair motioned for the cameraman to shoot video, as she approached the vehicle. “We’re covering a ‘lost-tourism’ angle of COVID,” said the interviewer.

“Like I care,” replied Lori, as she closed the passenger’s side door.

Lori’s eyes tightened, as the cameraman shot video of Lori hugging farewell to Larry.

“You’re *lucky* you get to fight with your wife,” said a dork, who no one in Long Beach had ever liked – even after winning the lottery and getting elected – except for the swimmer he had met on their first day at Woodrow Wilson high school. “No one married me.”

“Maybe one day,” said Lori. “Nice guys don’t always finish last.”

The woman with wild hair again approached Lori.

“A beautiful wife and you’ve got a kid, too,” smiled the 50s white woman from Maine.

“Stay the fuck outta my way,” shot back Lori, as the cameraman politely stopped shooting. “And keep that fucking camera off.” Lori awkwardly said farewell to Larry and wiped a rare tear, as December waved from the passenger’s window to say goodbye to her biggest fan. Lori climbed into the driver’s seat.

“We can cover gas, lodging and food with a VISA card provided by the Tourism Board,” said Andrel McGee. “And I’ve got my Dad’s *Green Book*.”

* * *

“Isn’t Maine the *other* direction?” asked December, checking Google maps, as the tightly packed U-Haul that included the duo from Maine slowly drove past the Bolsa Chica wetlands.

Most vehicles on the southbound lanes on Pacific Coast Highway displayed the American Flag or hand-produced signs taped inside windows, some of which read, “Open California,” and “All Business is Essential to Someone,” and “Killing the Economy Doesn’t Save Lives.”

“Why are we heading down PCH?” growled Lori Lewis, driving a U-Haul that could barely fit four adults and a nine-year-old.

“Clients with the tourism angle want footage of the Huntington Beach Pier,” said Karen Joplin, who sat at the far end of the passenger’s side.

Andrel McGee loaded a battery into a small camera and offered it to Riley, who sat between him and December. “Can Mr. Riley shoot video?” With a silent nod by the mother, Andrel handed the camera to the child and pointed to the approaching Huntington Beach oceanfront bluffs, with people walking dogs, or riding bikes, or carrying a surfboard.

“Someone called me, ‘Mister,’” said Riley, as he shot video of bumper-to-bumper traffic slowly passing the bluffs on one side of PCH and a vast oil field on the other.

Horns began to honk, as the U-Haul approached blinking lights, at PCH and Goldenwest, where Huntington Beach police either rerouted or stopped traffic.

Andrel handed his own camera to Karen, as two police officers scanned the U-Haul.

“Apparently there’s a protest,” said Karen Joplin, displaying her enormous smartphone. “Live FOX coverage.”

“We’ll be exposed to COVID!” gasped December, her arm wrapped around Riley, who held aim of his camera straight ahead to capture a police officer stopping the U-Haul.

Lori donned a mask and opened the window a few inches.

“You got a lot of people in there,” said the officer, eyeing Andrel. “Who’s boy is that?”

“This is my son!” shot back December, hugging Riley tightly.

“I don’t believe he’s...,” started Karen.

Andrel stayed motionless.

After a moment of silent tension, the officer waved the U-Haul through Goldenwest.

As Lori raised the window, Riley shot video of the officer talking into a shoulder phone.

“U-Haul, four plus one.”

Lori lurched forward.

“How cum you’re not shooting?” asked Riley.

“He’s being smart,” quickly injected Karen, who put his camera in the glove compartment.

“Things get unpredictable,” said Andrel.

Riley aimed the camera to capture dozen of smirking white protesters gathered near the roadblock, some carrying signs that read, “Stop the Lockdown,” and “Covid-19(84),” and “Brother Can You Spare a Hair-Cut?”

“The Pier is straight ahead,” said the woman with wild hair, scanning her phone.

“Like I don’t know PCH,” growled Lori Lewis, as the U-Haul got studied by protesters.

“Maybe people carry guns, like Michigan,” perked Riley Beach, aiming the camera to the group of unmasked white middle-aged protesters waving to honking cars, and displaying signs that read, “Don’t Cancel My Golf Season,” and “Fauci Lied, Main Street Died,” and “#FakeCrisis.” A smiling guy held a surfboard, with “Let Me Surf Again” painted across it.

“Don’t talk about guns like that,” said December, snatching the *Sgt. Rock* comic book on her son’s lap, and stuffing it behind her husband. “Don’t give him those.”

“Don’t ever say ‘gun’ to a stranger,” calmly instructed Karen, as Andrel politely nodded.

“Q... Q...,” yelled a protester holding a sign that called for the re-election of the President. “Pedophiles!”

“Wish I was still Active-Duty,” mumbled the recipient of a Presidential Unit Citation for saving lives in Afghanistan during a rocket attack against Bagram Airbase.

* * *

Driving the slow southbound slog, Lori Lewis slowed the U-Haul, as two more officers waved the vehicle to the right side of Pacific Coast Highway, one block from Main Street.

“Anti-COVID tourism,” said Karen, as an officer signaled for Lori to lower her window.

“Stay cool, stay cool,” quietly repeated Andrel.

After putting on her mask, Lori lowered the window a few inches.

“Yeh, four-plus-one,” said one officer, as Lori donned her mask. “All the way, please.” Lori did so, as the second officer tapped on the passenger’s side. “And the other one, please.”

Each officer rapidly examined the cameraman, as hundreds of tanned, smiling white people strolled along PCH or gathered outside Jack’s Surf Shop or crossed the controlled Main Street intersection to join a rally at the base of the HB Pier.

Only relaxed law enforcement officers controlling the crowd wore masks.

“My son taking a video,” nervously said December, as one officer lifted a person sidearm, while Riley aimed the small camera to the mass of light-skinned humanity.

“You girls moving into Downtown?” asked the HBPD officer, still glancing at Andrel.

“Driving to Beach Blvd to catch the 405,” replied Lori.

“Who’s boy?” asked the officer, looking directly at the cameraman.

Lori’s eyes tightened, as December said, “Mine... ours.”

“Gotta make sure no one’s snatching kids,” said the officer, to the nine-year-old clutching his mother’s arm.

The officers watched Lori and December silently scowl.

“We’re helping them move,” quickly added Karen, “and he’s helping unload.”

Andrel stayed motionless to Karen’s little white lie.

“We’re holding vehicles from crossing Main Street for a couple minutes, so remain in place,” said the officer, as he holstered his personal sidearm and walked away.

“Was he mean?” asked Riley, quietly, as Lori raised the window.

Neither parent spoke.

“Oh, everything is fine,” opined the woman with wild hair.

Riley continued shooting video.

At the base of the HB Pier, a mass of white protestors waved or wore the American Flag, and stood in front of a large professionally-printed banner urging the reelection of the President, alongside a teen in a bikini and grad cap who held a sign that read, “Stop Ruining My Senior Year.”

“Lars would be proud,” said Andrel, who still did not lift his camera, but looked to the Pier, where a middle-aged white guy pushing a wheelchair that appeared to carry a Real Doll decked in Flag-style attire and bearing a poster that declared, “Give Me Bianca or Give Me Death!”

“Maybe we can get out of the truck?” said Riley, holding the camera close to his eyes.

“Absolutely not!” shot back December Carrera, who had let her athlete-soldier husband name the child after Lori’s great-great-grandfather – Riley Beach – who had mustered with the Illinois 113th Volunteer Infantry in 1862, in a family that had volunteered to fight every war since losing 11 to the King’s redcoats during the Revolution.

“The order is to *remain in place*,” said Lori, pressing a childproof button to lock both doors.

“It’s hot out,” said Andrel McGee to the nine-year-old. “The air conditioning is nice.”

Karen Joplin looked at the visor mirror, applied makeup, donned her floral mask, and tapped on Andrel’s shoulder.

“Maybe him,” said Andrel with discomfort, encouraging Riley to aim his camera.

“This is Karen Joplin and guess who’s doing *their* Maine thing in this late May sunshine?” she said, motioning to tanned smiling white protesters celebrating freedom at the HB Pier.

“Finally,” shot Lori, shifting into first gear, as the HBPD ordered the U-Hail to move.

* * *

Lori put on her face mask, as the U-Haul reached the Beach Boulevard drive-thru window.

The cashier confirmed the \$40 order, returned the Maine Tourism Board VISA card and handed three large bags and two drink trays.

Lori drove the modest truck to a shaded parking space overlooking California Hwy 39.

“No land animals,” repeated Riley.

“Fish and chips, yum,” said December, handing out food.

“My legacy project about the *Green Book* will be a lot calmer than Huntington Beach,” said Andre Mc Gee.

“Free thing for your Dad isn’t the same as serving paying clients,” instructed Karen.

December gave a salad and sandwich to the cameraman. “Thank you for doing so nice,” she smiled.

Cars passing the fast food place honked to a trio of white protesters on the sidewalk, each holding a sign, two of which read, “A pandemic does not cancel our Constitutional rights,” and “Liberate Huntington Beach.” The third wore full-body protective clothing, a mask and sunglasses for 100% coverage, and displayed a printed banner that read, “COVID-19 is a lie.”

* * *

The U-Haul slowly approached the southbound onramp to the 405 Fwy, as police ordered drivers to slowly-and-safely pass a crowd of white protesters near the onramp.

“If your Mom says, ‘Yes,’” said Andre Mc Gee, again motionless, as the nine-year-old aimed the camera for another video.

“It’s okay, Little One,” calmly said December.

Riley Beach shot video of professionally-printed signs declaring support of the President’s reelection and hand-scrawled posters calling for freedom from tyranny.

“I’m Karen Joplin, and Surf City USA is America’s epicenter of a war against tyranny,” said the wild haired woman, as some signs read, “Liberty & Freedom before Safety & Security,” and “Honk if you Question Corona Virus,” and “Quarantine is 4 the Sick,” and “Will Not Comply.” The only protestor wearing a mask displayed the words “Covid Lie\$” across his hidden lips.

“And the big question is, ‘Did April’s COVID showers bring May’s reopened flowers?’” asked the wild haired woman, as protesters waved and smiled. “As Maine goes, so goes Surf City.”

Andrel bristled when one protester yelled and waved his fist at the dashing Black guy.

“It’s hard to breath in this thing,” said Karen, as she slid the mask down, “and that’s coming from a Master Sergeant.”

“You *have to* wear one!” shot December, who had spent \$150 in a dream-come-true essay contest to win a new life far away.

Lori Lewis lurched onto the southbound onramp.

* * *

“*Where have all the tourists gone?*” sang Karen Joplin, motioning to the vast-but-empty parking lot of Disneyland, as Lori Lewis drove north on the 5 Fwy. “*Long time passing.*”

As the U-Hail passed the Happiest Place on Earth™, Andrel again shot video, now of the unhappy driver.

“Will COVID’s showers bring red-white-and-blue flowers?” methodically modified Karen, while motioning to the empty theme park.

The nine-year-old looked out the window.

Andrel silently pointed to the boy, and Karen nodded.

“Won’t you miss the Magic Kingdom™?” asked Karen.

Riley Beach stayed silent, turning to his mother.

“It’s okay, Little One,” said December, to her son.

“We never went,” said Riley Lewis Carrera Beach, slowly. “Daddy didn’t want us to.”

Lori kept looked straight ahead, to a thin line of traffic on the typically jammed Interstate 5.

“Oh my,” gasped the interviewer, and signaled for Andrel to stop shooting.

Chapter Five –Suckers And Losers Make The Slog... Over There

“Mustered as a grunt when Teddy Roosevelt sent the Army Corps of Engineers to build the Panama Canal,” said the driver, staying close behind a truck carrying Doughboys. “Pulled Sergeant in Pershing’s hunt for Pancho Villa.”

“I voted for Teddy’s Bull Moose party,” replied Carl, of his first president election, a year after Earl and Carl became the 87th and 88th to earn a license to fly. “My friend who voted Taft told me I’m crazy to join the Air Service.”

“My Mom, too,” said the 21-year-old LT. “She’s afraid I’ll crash and die.”

“The Great War makes Poncho Villa look like a baseball game,” grumbled the Sergeant.

“At least pilots don’t live in trenches with mud and gas attacks and cannons,” said the LT.

“I just don’t want to die,” said one of the teenaged riflemen.

“Enemy!” yelled the second rifleman, who manned the Colt-Browning heavy machinegun.

“What?” asked the young LT.

“German planes!” barked Carl, eyes aimed upward, like an owl, seeking prey.

The rifleman began firing the Colt-Browning, as the second teenager fed the gun.

The Kaiser’s biplanes strafed their own heavy machine gun fire across a pockmarked road, motor vehicles speeding forward and infantrymen throwing themselves into adjacent muddy fields.

* * *

Silent tension gripped the five men, as the military caravan entered Vichy, where vines bore no grapes and trees offered no harvest.

“How far is 55 KM again?” asked a rifleman studying a map sprawled across the reconnaissance table, as the Davidson-Cadillac armored vehicle lurched ahead with AEF vehicles and a line of infantry. “”

“Multiple by one-point-six,” replied the other rifleman, rearming the heavy machine gun.

“*Divide*, not multiple,” corrected the driver. “Not everyone’s smart like us.”

“Maybe two hours to Clermont-Ferrand Aerodrome, Sir,” said the rifleman.

“We’re deep behind the Western Front,” said the junior LT airman, to no one in particular.

“How can German fighters be so bold?”

“Pilots fly where wings take ’em,” said Major Carl van der Bix, comparing his notepad of various military unit numbers to the clean map provided by Billy Mitchell. “Clermont-Ferrand... The 79th Aero squadron... A construction squadron... The 7th Aviation Instruction Center.”

“Too bad the construction unit isn’t just building the Panama Canal,” said Teddy’s grunt.
 “So how did *you* enlist, Major?”

* * *

“You’re crazy, VeeBee,” said Earl Daugherty, driving his 1910 Ford Model T motor vehicle across San Pedro’s undeveloped Pacific Avenue. “Help me build an aerodrome in Long Beach.”

“Easy dream for *you*, since your Dad named a building after you and bought you a plane,” said Carl, as they approached Fort Mac. “My only dream is getting away from the Old Man.”

“Don’t let him steal *your* dream,” said Earl. “Uniforms won’t free you from old bastards.”

* * *

The Clermont-Ferrand Aerodrome – now a military base, but originally one of the world’s first sites to handle civilian aircraft – sprawled across the grassy fields of central France, with rows of small hangers, and dozens of biplanes being wheeled onto the fields, or sent into the sky.

“LT, shoot some motion picture film of the base,” ordered Major Carl van der Bix, as everyone climbing out of the Davidson-Cadillac. “And hunt a second vehicle.”

“Yes, Sir,” saluted the 21-year-old airman, hoisting the huge box camera.

“Make sure everyone eats,” added Carl, to the Sergeant.

* * *

“How *old* are you, Major?” asked a gray-haired One Star General of the Army Air Service, in the Clermont-Ferrand aerodrome, as Carl handed a typed order, which read . . .

“American Expeditionary Forces | France | To AEF Staff Officers | From Gen John Pershing || Allow Major Carl van der Bix to report directly to AEF Air Service HQ, with no restriction on movement, assignment, or honorable conduct.”

“Got no aviators available,” said the aerodrome’s day-to-day XO, as he studied the order, stared at Carl, and handed the typed page back to the youngest Major in the United States Army.

“Don’t get your uniform muddy.”

* * *

“Back on the road,” ordered Carl van der Bix, to the Sergeant, motioning to a never-ending line of AEF vehicles and infantry moving on the pockmarked road. Carl turned to his junior officer.
 “Did you obtain a second vehicle?”

The LT didn’t reply, eyes instead locked on planes launching for morning patrol.

Carl scowled, as the two riflemen loaded ammunition and food into the vehicle.

“When do I finally fly?” asked the 21-year-old.

“When I let you,” said Carl, who had been ordered by Colonel Oliver Spaulding to not fly. “Pilots who pay attention are the ones who survive, Lieutenant.”

* * *

The Sergeant maintained close distance in the line of AEF vehicles, slowly passing infantry.

“When did you actually earn wings, LT?” asked Carl, scanning through the window slit, peering upward to spot five American aircraft patrolling over the military column.

“April 1918,” said the junior LT, “but no one’s let me fly since San Diego.”

“Approaching Orange,” said the rifleman studying the map.

“I’ll tour the hospitals as the LT shoots a motion picture,” said Carl, studying his notepad.

“I’ve driven this route,” said the Sergeant, shifting gears. “There *might* be Doughboys, but most are ANZAC who got tortured in the trenches after misery of Gallipoli.”

* * *

The LT hand-cranked the large motion picture camera, showing Carl talking with a Nun.

“I believe we *do* have two AEF aviators,” said the Nun, leading Major Carl van der Bix away from the camera, past dull eyes of amputees and gassing victims laying in beds row upon row in a massive ward of the Catholic hospital in Orange France.

The LT continued filming, as the Major and Nun marched across the ward, and disappeared into a long adjacent hallway of rooms used for advanced recovery.

“We serve mostly Australians and New Zealanders,” said the Nun, escorting the Major beyond two *Garde Républicaine* stationed at a door marked as “Kaiser” for prisoners-of-war.

“You’ll find more Americans at the hospital in Avignon.”

* * *

“May I join you?” asked Major Carl van der Bix, to a pair of LTs, in the only room with American aviators in the Catholic military hospital in Orange. “John Powell? David Armstrong?”

Each LT said nothing.

“I’m assigned to gather aviators,” said Carl, taking a chair.

“We’re not available,” said the aviator in bed.

“Our Major wants our wings back,” said the other, sitting in a chair, “and there’s no way you’ve held a gold leaf as long as the commander of the 39th Aero Squadron.”

* * *

“Are we fueled?” asked Major Carl van der Bix, to his Sergeant standing alongside the Davidson-Cadillac armored vehicle.

The driver nodded.

“No second vehicle?” asked Carl, to his junior officer, who sheepishly shook his head. “Keep hunting, Lieutenant.”

“We rounded up meat and cheese,” said a 17-year-old, lofting sacks into the vehicle.

“And a bottle of wine!” said the other teenaged rifleman, receiving the sacks.

“Very good, gentlemen,” said Carl, motioning to the vehicle. “On to Avignon.”

* * *

As the LT hand-cranked the motion picture camera, Major Carl van der Bix awkwardly posed with a gray-haired Cardinal, outside a vast military hospital located within the huge stone palace that had once served as home to seven Catholic Popes, when Avignon had played host to the Church split in two by the Great Schism of 1378.

The Cardinal silently lifted his finger, instructing the Major to follow a stunningly-beautiful Nun, to find American airmen recovering from the Great War. The LT finished filming to take down proper spelling of the Cardinal’s name, repeatedly glancing upward to watch the Nun lead the Major into the Palace.

Inside, other Nuns joined doctors and nurses to serve hundreds of AEF survivors, also resting row upon row. The Major followed the Nun for “Advanced Recovery,” who motioned to another pair of aviators, as eyes lit up upon her arrival. As patients stared at the stunningly beautiful Nun, the Major stood stiffly, and watched while blood-stained sheets get cleared off an empty bed.

“May I join you, gentlemen?” asked the Major. “I’m assigned to gather aviators.”

* * *

“The Palace is made for movies,” said Major Carl van der Bix, watching his junior officer shot film of him exiting the military hospital. “Hope you got her name.”

“They don’t give last names,” said the 21-year-old LT, who pointed to another armored car parked alongside the Davidson-Cadillac, “but I did secured a second vehicle.”

“We’re getting two aviators, so you’ll need one of the riflemen for the Colt-Browning,” said the Major. “Did you get a driver?”

“No, Sir, but the Division’s XO gave me a fancy bottle of wine,” said the young pilot, shouldering the large camera. “Popes used to drink it.”

* * *

Carl passed the finest wine of France to his junior officer – barely of age to drink – who took a swig of Chateauneuf du Pape, and asked, “What’s it like to get shot down?”

The bottle circulated.

“Crashing is like being punched really hard, but it keeps hurting,” said one of the pilots roped by the Major during his tour of the military hospital inside the Palais des Papes, one of the largest and most important medieval Gothic buildings in Europe.

“Unless you die like the guy on the bed next to us,” said the other pilot, “so at least it stops.”

“Which squadron gets us?” asked the first pilot, passing the bottle.

“You’ll fly to protect the First Army,” said Carl, taking a large drink and passing the bottle.

“In other words,” said the LT taking the bottle, “you won’t tell us shit.”

The bottle kept moving.

“Let’s just talk about French girls,” said another, reaching for the wine.

“Like the girl who escorted the Major,” asked the cameraman, studying his small notepad. “Sister Grace.”

“Don’t talk bad about my Angel of Ladies,” said one of the new LTs.

The four pilots drank and insulted the Kaiser and dangled legs off the edge of the ancient broken bridge outside of the stone walls of Avignon, as two teenagers and the 30-something driver sat alongside the two armored vehicles parked at the base of the bridge, to share mean and cheese and a bottle of wine.

“I thought we died,” said one aviator. “Then came Grace, so I figured I’d gone to Heaven.”

“By Grace, we didn’t die,” said the other LT, raising the bottle to the Palace. “Not yet.”

* * *

“Approaching the 9th Aero Squadron, Sir,” said the Sergeant – driving not drunk – as the pair of Davidson-Cadillac armed vehicle approached the First Army’s aerodrome in Marseille, just an hour after Carl van der Bix and the three LTs finished the Chateauneuf du Pape and also emptied the second bottle on the broken bridge of Avignon.

In his drunken eyes, Major Carl van der Bix watched his best friend, Earl Daugherty, land his new biplane onto the Long Beach shoreline.

“Sir?” repeated the driver.

Carl didn't hear the Sergeant, but instead heard Fort Mac's commanding officer who had driven from San Pedro to tell the Old Man that Carl would rise in the ranks quickly, due to his talents for flight and mechanics.

"He needs to sober up," said the teenaged rifleman.

"It's what he gets for finishing our bottle," scowled the driver.

Carl's drunken eyes didn't see the vehicle pull off the road, and instead recalled his stern father's face, of no congratulations on his commission as a Lieutenant, or becoming the tenth to earn wings in the fledgling Army Air Service, or making Captain in the spring of 1917 as part of Congressional legislation to fund deployment of the American Expeditionary Force to France.

Chapter Six – Get COVID Kicks On Route 66

December Carrera turned on the radio in the U-Haul, picking up an Inland Empire station. Lori tenderly touched her wife's hand, but said nothing, as Frank Sinatra sang, "*Fly With Me.*" December smiled to Lori and stroked her son's hair, as the radio station cut to the news.

"Dozens of speakers converged on the County Administrative Center in downtown Riverside Tuesday to demand the Board of Supervisors end remaining health orders and start the process of liberating businesses from coronavirus-related restrictions," said the radio.

"What's that?" asked the nine-year-old, who paused from *Sgt. Rock*, to watch Andrel McGee carefully study another old magazine.

"My Dad's old book," said Andrel McGee, holding, "The Negro Travelers' Green Book."

"Oh, put that down," said Karen, pushing down the 1959 edition.

"Hey, this is my Dad's," said Andrel, as December glanced down, to see a San Francisco cable car with print that read, "Travel-Wise People Travel by THE GREEN BOOK."

"What does that mean?" asked Riley, pointing to the bottom of the cover, which read, "Carry your Green Book with you... you may need it."

"My Dad got this copy from his Dad," said Andrel. "It'd be wonderful if we could stop along Route 66 to see if any of the original places are still around."

"You shouldn't expect this family to lose time for their own mission," said Karen Joplin.

"We're going there anyway," said December, as her husband pointed to the San Bernardino interchange that connects with Interstate 15.

Andrel McGee smiled as broadly as Karen Joplin scowled, as December stroked her husband's hand and hugged her comic-book-reading son.

Karen turned up the radio.

"This is medical tyranny," said another voice on radio coverage of a government meeting. "You sit up here in your ivory tower and make decisions, but who's going to pay your salary if there's no tax base because businesses are going out of business?"

As the news continued, Andrel McGee continued reading the guide used by experienced travelers, while humming Nat Cole's hit, written by Bobby Troup, who repeat names from a map.

"You don't look anything like him, but you act like my husband, Bear," said Karen, tapping the patch for the Chicago Cubs. "He never listens."

Lori kept silently driving.

* * *

Lori Lewis – who had said nothing since getting onto the 405 freeway in Huntington Beach – exited Interstate 40, at Barstow Road.

Everyone else remained silent, as Andrei scanned the Green Book, as Lori approached a gas station and fast food joints.

“Can I please get the vegan burger?” said Riley, pointing to Subway.

“It’s dangerous to go inside right now,” said December, wagging her face mask.

“It can be dangerous going anywhere,” added the cameraman.

“You paint a dark view for a comedian,” growled Karen.

“Duh,” said Riley, looked at Andrei. “It’s because he has dark skin?”

“No, Little One,” said December, as Andrei smiled warmly. “It’s because bad things can happen to a very nice person.”

* * *

“Can’t we stop?” begged Riley Beach, as his father drove a silent slog across Interstate 40, on a pitch black night, with no cars casting light upon the road crossing the California desert.

“Talk to your mother,” said Lori Lewis, finally speaking.

Karen and Andrei whispered to one another.

“Hunny, we *need* to stop,” said December, to an unbending husband.

“We haven’t even done 400 miles,” said Lori, staring ahead.

“The Tourism Board will cover the motel,” said Karen, pointing to the Kingman exit.

Lori kept driving silently.

* * *

“Please, Daddy,” whimpered Riley, as the U-Hail passed Flagstaff Arizona.

“The Tourism Board is *happy* to cover gas and housing,” said Karen, bargaining for sleep.

“Your wife’s winning essay is a *big* story to promote our state.”

“Please, Daddy,” repeated Riley.

“Stop begging!” demanded the athlete-and-soldier who had played no role a decade ago in impregnating her wife or the recent choice to forever leave her family’s hometown of Long Beach.

“You’re being terrible,” growled December, to her husband.

“Don’t forget Winona,” said Andrei McGee, pointed to the upcoming exit.

* * *

Lori parked in an empty Motel 6 lot, in Winona Arizona, donned her mask, climbed out of the driver's side, and walked to a locked lobby door. After repeatedly knocking, someone appeared behind the motel lobby counter. Rather than opening the door, the clerk motioned for Lori to call the phone number shown on a window.

"Yes, we do have two rooms," said the clerk, on the phone behind the counter, while looking directly to Lori, who stood outside the locked door.

"Obviously," said the soldier. "There's no one here."

"Text your VISA number and I'll unlock the two rooms while you're in the truck," replied the clerk.

Lori returned to the U-Haul, and knocked on the passenger's window. "Text your VISA," said Lori, to the public relations duo from Maine.

* * *

"Excuse me," said the motel clerk, as the duo from Maine rolled their suitcases towards one of two opened motel rooms. "No room holds four people."

"Really, it's okay," assured the woman with wild hair. "He works for me."

The clerk shrugged at the Maine duo and two married women with a kid, and walked off.

"Bear rejected my wisdom all the time, too," said Karen,.

"I always pay attention to everything to you," said Andrel McGee.

"Well, good night," said December, carrying her own bag to follow Lori into the other door.

Riley smiled and waved to the duo from Maine.

* * *

Lori stood outside the two motel rooms, looking to the midnight moon and waiting for her call to connect.

"Um... hello," weakly replied Larry van der Bix.

"I can't win this one," said the decorated soldier and Olympian, looking into her window to see December and Riley asleep.

"You don't have to *win*," said the dork. "You just gotta be happy."

Lori struggled to peer through the neighbor window, and saw the Maine duo making out. "Easier said than done."

* * *

“We’re gonna have food soon,” said December, as she and Riley studying math together at the table inside their Motel 6 room.

Lori’s phone buzzed. “It’s Larry,” she said quietly, walking to the door.

“You need your mask!” said December.

“There’s no one else except the Dynamic Duo,” moaned the soldier-and-athlete, before surrendering to grab a mask and step out.

“How’s ‘Road Trip Day Two’ starting out?” asked Larry.

“Action packed,” said Lori, as the duo from Maine also stepped outside.

“Chew chew,” playfully tooted Andre McGehee, mimicking a Blue Line train driver.

“Picking up some Denny’s,” said the wild haired woman.

“Nothing matters, Larry,” said Lori, as she watched the Maine duo walk to the stairwell.

* * *

December dried her coal-black hair and Lori scanned text messages.

“Breakfast!” said Karen Joplin, as the Maine duo set large Denny’s bags onto a table in the Motel 6, took off masks and washed hands. “Courtesy of the Maine Tourism Board.”

The married couple didn’t look up.

Riley Beach lay in a bed reading comics.

“Guess I didn’t expect it, in Winona Arizona,” said Andre quietly.

“Stop overreacting,” said Karen, emptying packets of syrup and butter.

* * *

“Pardon if it’s a little personal, but why not visit Disneyland?” asked Karen, as she smeared butter across her pancakes.

“Ask my Mom,” said Riley, poking his full plate.

“We want him to be *him*,” said December, smiling methodically.

“It’s one of the few places anyone can go just to have fun,” said Andre, drinking coffee.

“Disney’s a machine,” said Lori Lewis, pushing her fork through scrambled eggs..

* * *

“Thank you for agreeing to the video,” said Karen, again seated inside the U-Haul, awaiting the early-morning start of Day Two.

Andre stood outside the vehicle, scanning for police. After a 360 degree search, he hoisted a huge camera onto his shoulder and began to shoot video through the open window.

“Here we are on America’s famous Route 66, along with Maine’s newest homeowners,” said the wild haired interviewer, warmly motioning to the two women and the nine-year-old boy. “Our population is growing, but not because we’re having lots of kids.”

“I wanted the Harbor House Inn so Riley can live a special new life in Maine,” said December, hugging her son.

“It’s not like I did anything,” grumbled the athlete-and-soldier.

Riley whimpered.

Andrel McGee kept the camera focused on the interview, but kept scanning the area.

“You’re being terrible!” shot back the wife. “It’s like we never left Washington!”

Lori’s eyes glazed as her wife kept talked during the interview. Instead, the soldier replayed ancient memories of unanticipated expectations on the wedding night.

* * *

“I wanted this to be our first dinner as officially married newlyweds,” said the young December, swishing her simple-but-elegant dress, as the couple was led by a Maître De to a private table in the spectacular Hay-Adam hotel’s ornate Lafayette restaurant.

Lori – in a LT’s dress uniform – settled into her chair and looked at her wife, seated at a window that showed snow falling upon the Washington Monument.

A wine steward approached, bearing a tray with two glasses of a dark red French wine. “May I interest you in a complimentary honeymoon glass of Chateauneuf du Pape?”

“I don’t do alcohol,” said Lori.

“Uh... not the right time,” said December.

The wine steward walked off, as Lori opened the menu.

“So...,” said December, awkwardly gazing to her husband. “Maybe *now* is the right time.”

“I don’t drink wine,” said the newly-married soldier, reaching to touch her wife’s hand.

“I can’t right now, either,” struggled the stunningly beautiful wife in her early 20s.

“It’s not *can’t*,” said Lori. “I don’t.”

“That’s good, I guess,” said December, gripped Lori’s hand. “It’s just, um... something else.”

Lori waited.

“Kind’a big,” added December.

Lori still smiled and waited for her wife’s news.

“I’m pregnant,” said the diva with coal-black hair.

Lori’s hand went limp in December’s fingers.

“I know,” said December. “It’s kind’a a big surprise.”

“Dee, how can we have a baby?” said Lori, pulling her hand back. “We’re girls.”

“I know,” said December, in a small voice.

“We’re not doing test tubes or a turkey baster, so, the only way...,” said the soldier.

“I know,” repeated the small voice.

“Dee, we got married.”

“And I’ve been totally faithful since sailing half way around the world in Larry’s yacht to surprise you at the USO show in Afghanistan,” said December. “And it’s definitely not Larry.”

“You didn’t waste any time,” said Lori, as she stood a bit to look toward December’s torso. “You’re not even showing.”

“I’m not a big girl,” said December, quietly, “but you haven’t seemed to notice me much since we moved in together after the USO show a few months ago.”

“What about your period?”

“It never comes on time,” said December, “so three months is almost normal.”

“How do you even know?”

“You were off-base staffing the General when I got taken to the emergency room,” said the young bride. “They told me before I left the hospital.”

“They told *you*,” said Lori. “Nobody told *me*.”

“They couldn’t,” said December. “Florida doesn’t recognize...”

“*You* didn’t tell me,” said Lori.

Tears rolled down December’s cheeks. “But that’s why we’re having a great getaway...”

“We go to a fancy hotel after a surprise wedding, so you can tell me you fucked some guy, and I get to raise the kid?”

The waitress approached the table.

“It was a long boat ride,” said December, crying. “But this can be *our* baby.”

“I love you, Dee, but obviously I didn’t father that baby,” said Lori, sternly.

“I’m... serving you... tonight,” said the waitress, awkwardly.

The LT in her dress uniform looked up to the waitress. “We are not even *close* to ordering.”

* * *

“Is there anything you’d like the people of Maine to *know* about Riley’s special story?” asked Karen Joplin, extending a microphone to Lori and December, as the U-Haul warmed up. “Help make America’s oldest population smile again.”

“No comment,” growled Lori Lewis, her hands tightly gripping the U-Haul’s steering wheel, “except stop twisting that phrase.”

“Winning this essay contest means everybody wins a special story,” said December, kissing her son’s forehead. “Maybe his story will be a new life on a tiny island on the other side of America and it’ll be *his* house forever.”

December wiggled her hand, to encourage Riley to dangle the ornate key given by Larry.

“No comment,” repeated the soldier.

Andrel McGee kept shooting while scanning for roaming police.

* * *

Lori held the Lafayette menu and whispered. “Do you even *know* whose kid it is?”

“Of course I know!” said December. “Do you think I’m some cheap slut?”

The banter in the ornate Lafayette restaurant quieted.

December looked around the most elegant hotel restaurant in the District of Columbia, to see rich faces staring at the two beautiful women. “I mean, I think I do.”

The waitress again approached the table, smiling and holding a notepad.

“You think?” said Lori.

“Can you keep your voice down?” whispered December.

The waitress again held her notepad for an order.

“You’re not *sure* who got you pregnant?” said Lori, not complying with her wife’s request. “We’ll know pretty soon, won’t we?”

“Perhaps you need a little more time,” said the waitress, nervously.

“Almost ready,” said December politely, quickly looking. “A minute or two.”

“Maybe I *should* get complimentary wine,” said Lori, looking to the falling snow.

* * *

“This road trip feels like a reality TV fight,” grumbled Lori, driving away from Motel 6.

“Maybe don’t fight,” said Riley, his eyes downward.

“Every couple fights, Little One,” said December. “What matters is we love each other.”

“Me and Bear fought a lot,” said the wild haired woman. “We are still true to each other, but he’s doing his own *Maine thing* right now.”

“Right,” said Lori, staring at the duo whom she had watched making out the night before.

“Don’t worry,” said Andre McGee. “Everybody’s wants to edit bad stuff away.”

* * *

“If you want to throw in the towel because I had sex before arriving in Afghanistan, okay, tell me!” growled the pregnant newlywed, after pushing the elevator button, next to the Lafayette restaurant. “But you can’t have a bad attitude about our child.”

When the couple entered a crowded elevator, both women stayed quiet.

Alone in the elevator after other guests exited, December gently pulled Lori’s hand, placing it on a tiny bump. “This is *our* baby... *our* baby... I’m carrying this baby in my body. You’re going to be with me when our baby is born, because we’re gonna be parents for our whole life. *Us!*”

Lori said nothing, but kept her hand on December’s belly.

“Please *love* our baby.” December gently kissed Lori’s broad shoulder. “I need to know that you’ll love our baby...”

Lori looked to her newlywed wife’s coal-black hair. “Dee, I don’t know.”

“Kiss our baby,” said December, kissing her husband’s neck.

“What?” said Lori.

“Go on,” said December, stepping back to offer her torso. “Show our baby some love. Kiss our baby.”

“It’s not my baby,” said Lori.

“I know you’re not a boy and you didn’t father this child,” said December, tears welling. “But this is our baby, now.” December wiped away tears. “You’re gonna teach our Little One to ride a bike and play sports and I’m gonna show how to dance and cook lasagna.” December stroked Lori’s shoulder. “Please, Hunny... I need to know that you love our baby.”

Lori didn’t move.

“Please...,” begged December, as the elevator approached their floor. “Please.”

The elevator door opened, showing Lori squatting to delicately kiss her wife’s belly.

December’s fingers dug into Lori’s blonde hair, pulling her husband closer. “More...”

* * *

Andre McGee looked up from his Dad’s Green Book to see the morning sun over Arizona.

“The people of Maine want more young couples with happy kids,” said Karen Joplin.
“Riley can be exactly who he wants to be, forever.”

“We all get new lives,” said December, kissing her son, “and keep them forever.”

“Maybe we can all do our *Maine thing*,” said the nine-year-old, to his parents.

Lori Lewis looked at Riley Beach, neither smiling nor scowling.

* * *

“May I?” said Andrel McGee, his finger on the radio, as the U-Haul passed Gallup NM. Lori Lewis nodded, while her wife surfed social media and the nine-year-old again read comics. Andrel surfed the radio, and gazed at the rising sandstone cliffs of Red Rock Park.

“The Navajo Nation is suffering an outbreak of COVID-19, but almost no one can help,” said a voice over the radio.

“Do any stations play *music* anymore,” said Lori, lowering the volume, while the news story carried a pulmonologist telling of the hospital’s few rooms, each lined with cots row upon row, for the 22 patients who had tested positive the night before.

“Stay cool,” said Andrel, who kept listening to the radio without moving, as two deputies in a New Mexico highway patrol vehicle slowly passed the U-Haul, studying the five people inside.

The radio story continued coverage about Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital – the only acute care facility within 110 miles of Gallup – as the highway patrol threw on flashing lights.

“Just don’t want kicks on Route 66,” muttered Andrel.

“Just let me do any talking,” said the wild haired woman, looking thru her round colorful sunglasses to watch Lori pull to the side. “And we’re driving with an Olympian.”

Lori Lewis – who had earned four Silver and a Bronze in London – said nothing, as deputies with open holsters walked on either sides of the U-Haul.

* * *

“Are you famous somehow?” said the deputy, examining Lori’s California license.

“London,” stuttered Lori. “2012.”

The deputy looked confused, while the second deputy kept his eyes locked on the only Black passenger.

“Four Silver and a Bronze in swimming,” said Lori.

“Who’s the boy?” asked the deputy.

“This is our son,” said December.

Andrel silently lived his Mantra.

“Not him,” said the deputy holding Lori’s license, as the other lifted his personal sidearm.

“Are they the nice people?” asked Riley Beach.

After a pause, the deputy returned Lori’s license. “Stay safe and enjoy New Mexico.”

* * *

“You always ask for *our* stories,” said December, turning off the radio. “Tell us *yours*.”

“Like your *Maine thing*,” quickly added Riley, lowering *Sgt. Rock*.

Karen elbowed Andrel, perhaps half her age. “We’re with friends.”

“Am I still an opening act?” said the cameraman.

“So are you a musician or something?” asked December.

“My Dad’s pissed, cuz I would’a been the ninth generation to pull concrete in Portland,” said Andrel, “but I’ve done comedy for ten years.”

“Isn’t that in Oregon?” said December, calling on Google maps.

“Portland Maine is the most important town in the nation making concrete,” said Karen. “Has been for centuries.”

“I wanted to either join the Army or do comedy,” said Andrel, “so I could hitch a ride away from ice and thunder.”

“You were in the Army?” asked Riley, enthusiastically.

“That’s obviously not from a Master Sergeant,” said Lori, who earned the Unit Citation as a Staff Sergeant touring forward bases across the Central Command, when the prior Administration had allowed combat assignments for female service personnel.

“*She* was in the Army,” said December, motioning to the woman with wild hair, in her 50s.

“And my sweetheart-turned-hermit,” added Karen.

“Hermit, huh?” said December, quietly admiring the face of the unemployed comedian.

“We enlisted in high school and retired from Active Duty ten years ago,” said Karen. “Since he wanted time alone in the forest, I took PR gigs.”

“Some people say they’ve seen Bear in the woods,” said Andrel McGee, mimicking Ronald Reagan, “and some don’t think there’s a Bear at all over by the Harbor House Inn.”

“A bear?” repeated Riley, laughing when Andrel performed as a grizzly.

“He lives by the Harbor House?” asked December.

“He’s just a big cub,” purred Kristian, resting a finger on the Chicago patch. “After basing and deployment together through twenty years in uniform, he wanted his *own* Maine thing... so my Bear in the woods... over there... on the Island.”

“No kids?” asked Lori, to the retired MSG

“We did...,” started Karen, “but our daughter... just didn’t make it.”

Lori tightened her lips.

“And it wasn’t COVID or anything,” added the retired NCO.

“Stories like Miss Karen’s can hurt forever, even when no one sees it,” said the comedian.

December offered her hand to a woman old enough to be her mother, and locked eyes.

“I’m so sorry about your daughter.”

“It’s a long story and it’s more than I can talk about,” said Karen, making an awkward handoff to the comedian, who didn’t skip a beat.

“When COVID emptied the clubs, she offered PR gigs together,” said Andrei.

“You don’t have to tell us personal things,” said Lori.

“There’s nothing bad we do,” quickly added the comedian.

“Since only a few hundred people live on the island, why not introduce your husband and spend a few weeks telling us about the Island,” said December, hugging her smiling son.

“You did 20 years and now you’re a hippy?” said Lori.

“The Bear wanted to leave high school as a junior, so we cut a deal to marry and enlist,” said Karen, peering over her bright red sunglasses. “He made Sergeant first, but soured when I beat him for MSG”

“Is he a big bear or a little bear?” asked the nine-year-old.

“He’s as big as a bear can be,” smiled Karen, “but he was just a cub when we fell in love.”

“And the kid?” asked Lori.

“Don’t talk that way to someone who lost...,” said December, to her husband.

“She deserved more,” said Karen, slowly. “Not every military brat makes it.”

“So how’s the public relations business?” said December, looking at the woman in her 50s sitting next to the incredibly cute guy half her age.

“Just like comedy, it’s about confidence,” said Andrei McGee. “Make people smile.”

“Sometimes I wish we were both just back in uniform,” said Karen Joplin.

Lori nodded slightly, but said nothing.

Thanks For Reading This Initial Edition

- You've read about each major character in two love stories set a century apart.
- Characters put on the respective boots to march through epic global battles.
- The slog across France and America will erupt into the violence of the final push on a world war and the righteous demands against inequity.
- In 1918, the young soldier falls in love with his Danish Ballerina, who must choose whether to travel through the most brutal killer ever to strike the Industrial Age, to start a new life in southern California.
- In 2020, after the killing of George Floyd, the married women must decide whether to drive through COVID to start a new life far away.
- The final two principle characters – the Bear and the Ballerina – enter the love stories, to show that life's biggest desire sometimes end with love's greatest sorrow.
- Survivors cannot linger in chaos after wars ultimately end, but no matter the challenges, it comes down to love and courage to outrank hatred and domination.
- Aim to finish the 50,000-to-60,000-word book by Summer 2021.
- Please offer your review by sending email to bill@billyorton.com.