



Love & Anxiety? Meet Pandemics & Privilege!

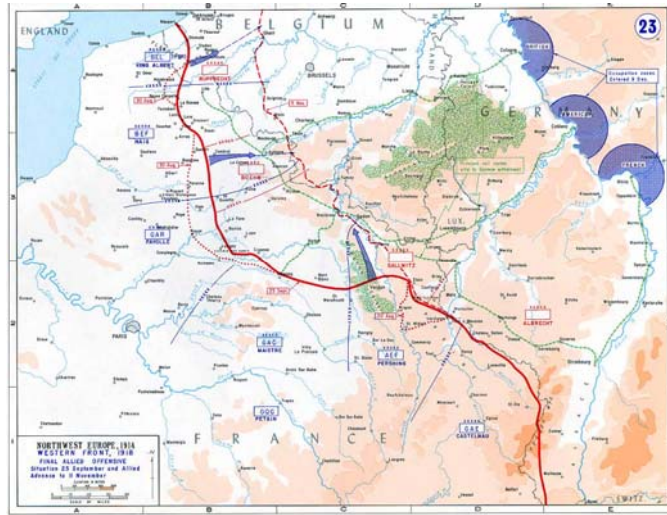
'Ha! Funny! Fantastic!' -- Arnold Spankergrüber

Novel By Billy Orton
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PART ONE – TWO PANDEMICS TWO WARS



America lost 150,000 Doughboys in just 18 months fighting during “The Great War.” The death toll of all armies fighting “The War to End All Wars” is estimated between 8,573,054 to 10,824,236. Yet World War I pales in comparison to the Spanish Flu, which took 100 million lives in two years, making it the most brutal killer ever to strike the Industrial Age.

Chapter One – A Century Of Anxiety

“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 during their first day at Woodrow Wilson high school.

“Won’t divorce be tough on the kid?” asked Larry, flipping through a key ring that included several giant ornamental keys made a hundred years earlier, to help lure a Danish ballerina to the family’s palatial Naples Island estate. “At least you have one.”

“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, inserting a key into the door. “It snows!”

“December only cares about winning a free house,” said Lori, looking upward, “and all the kid does 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 Dannenberg 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.

“It’s good to know about the past,” said Larry, as his phone buzzed a text.

“Frickin’ Arnold Spankergrüber keeps threatening to show up.”

“Arnold Spankergrüber *knows* you?” exclaimed Lori.

“I hate politics,” said Larry, who had won his only election by pretending to be a cowboy while dumping millions from his own lottery winnings into mass mailings, television commercials, full-page ads in four local newspapers, and an aggressive coordinated social media campaign.

“Don’t you *want* to be on City Council?” asked Lori. “You’re pretty lucky.”

“To get laughed at again over my ‘Blinker Day’ idea?” asked the Dork-in-Chief.

“No one likes me anyway.”

“So we both won and 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, known for lottery winnings and his absurd campaign, 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, as the dork unlocked the door to the suite that had been built on Naples to lure a ballerina to leave Europe. “Maybe, I’ll make up some reason other than the kid.”

“Don’t lie,” said the dork. “Defending lies with more lies guarantees defeat.”

The two entered the room where the ballerina spent hours each day a century ago, in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors so as to teach ballet students or practice or perform. Lori examined a framed-but-yellowing newspaper clip that showed presidential candidate Herbert Hoover watching the Danish ballerina perform during his August 1928 campaign appearance in Bixby Park.

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

“And you tell me *that*, too,” said Lori, again 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, before arriving in Long Beach, California, a small-but-growing beach town incorporated just 30 years earlier.

“Say nothing,” said the dork. “You won’t be called a liar for what you don’t say.”

“You’re the only person I can talk to about divorce,” said the athlete and soldier.

“Well, perhaps you need something *old* to help find something *new*,” said Larry, as he ruffled up his sleeves and – *presto!* – produced a huge ancient key. “I’ve got extra, since I’m the one who’ll get the house.”

“At least you’ve got an idea about the future,” said Lori, taking the enormous gift, “but I’m afraid to say *anything* to her about the kid.”

“It’s kind of a privilege to just *feel* afraid,” said the dork, scanning messages from his Chief of Staff, about calls from Arnold, someone named “That Jon Guy” and another prank call from Hollywood. “When life’s stacked against you, it’s easy to be afraid.”

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

“Dang it, now someone’s waiting in my office,” said Larry, who turned off his cell phone and walked to the Victrola 78-rpm phonographic disc player given as a wedding gift to Carl and Astrid. “Let’s listen to records and escape.”

As Lori studied ornate lettering on her giant 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, of Long Beach CA, 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 on the Victrola. “No need, Captain.”

Carl remained at attention, as Pershing walked directly to the 28-year-old airman, who had begun flying eight years earlier, 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 had ordered Carl and Earl to pass out flyers promoting the family’s Long Beach real estate business to lure potential homebuyers from the crowds of wealthy tourists who had crossed the country by train or ship in January 1910, 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.



One year after the 1910 air show in Dominguez Hills, Long Beach's Earl Daugherty became the 87th American to receive a federal license to fly. Daugherty went on to found Long Beach Airport.

Chapter Two – A Century Before COVID, We Went ‘Over There’

Major Carl van der Bix remained at attention in the Officers Lounge in Paris and heard Enrico Caruso singing, but two days without sleep sent his mind far away from being pinned by General John J. Pershing, the Supreme Commander of the American Expeditionary Force.

* * *

“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 accompanying Pershing, “General Bernard 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 scratching and popping showed the Victrola had 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 of hearing the Victrola or his new boss, 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.

“You may wind up with the shortest career as a Major in the U.S. Army,” growled Colonel Oliver Spaulding.

Carl shook his head, and again saw that he was in Paris, in a nearly-empty Officers Lounge, and that his new boss 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 continued skipping.

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

Major Carl van der Bix heard the ongoing yelling, but stared instead at a ghost.

“Stop dreaming, Major!” yelled Colonel Spaulding.

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

“Saint-Mihiel will be the first battle led by the AEF!” barked Colonel Spaulding. “It you’re sleeping on the job, it won’t just be *you* who dies.”

Carl could only see David Arian, from San Pedro, the ghost who got transferred to command Vermont’s 57th Pioneer Infantry and would become the highest-ranking Doughboy killed when the USS *Leviathan* delivered 2,0000 dead soldiers and the Spanish Flu that slayed ’em.

“Van der Bix!” shouted the gray-haired Colonel, slapping the new Major.

The ghost of David Arian – like a longshoreman making sure that an injury to one would not become the injury to all – sought to awaken the exhausted airman, who had not slept for days. Carl repeatedly blinked, as the ghost sent a waft of smoke across the room – a cloud that looked more like a face mask – to warn the Army’s youngest Major that the Great War may end, but arriving is a pandemic that becomes the most brutal killer ever to strike the Industrial Age.

“Downstairs in five minutes, Major!” ordered the furious Colonel Oliver 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 AEF Supreme Commander,” yelled Colonel Oliver Spaulding, as a grim-faced driver maneuvered the armored vehicle carrying the officers across pockmarked roads with bumps so violent that Carl van der Bix finally woke up. “You are *not* some circus performer!”

* * *

Major Carl van der Bix climbed out of the motor vehicle when they arrived at Chaumont.

“Took your sweet time, Major,” said General Billy Mitchell, the number two commander of the fledgling U.S. Army Air Service, who had himself made LT and climbed the ranks quickly, once his father – the Senator of Wisconsin – exercised the privilege of moving his son up the ladder. Mitchell unfolded his personal map and laid it across the hood.

Carl yawned as he produced a pencil and small notepad and began meticulously scrawling numbers shown on Mitchell’s map, to record units assigned across the Western Front.

“We need to rapidly grow the Air Service in the south, so I’m sending you to Marseille,” said Billy Mitchell, handing Carl a clean map and a typed order signed by John Pershing and witnessed by Mason Patrick. “Wave this at any big-headed bastard who gets in your 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 and base them in Marseille.”

“Carry extra pilots in *that*,” said Carl, pointing to the Davidson-Cadillac reconnaissance vehicle, where a giant rifleman loaded ammunition. “We’ll already be tight... with *him*.”

“You need both riflemen for the Colt-Browning M1895,” said Oliver Spaulding, pointing to the Privates, the giant being at least a foot taller. “Get the LT to round up more vehicles.”

“Fueled, Major,” said the grim-faced Sergeant, who had driven Carl to meet Billy Mitchell and now is assigned to go to the only AEF aerodrome along the southern tip of the Western Front.

“Hey’a Major,” said a young aviator – the junior LT – balancing a large hand-cranked motion picture camera over his shoulder and carrying an armload of unexposed film reels.

“How am I supposed to feed ’em?” said Carl, looking at the giant rifleman.

“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 this year.”

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

“Me and Johnnie disembarked six weeks ago, Major,” said the enormous rifleman.

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

“Seventeen, Sir,” said each Doughboy.

“Our whole class enlisted right away,” said the small Private. “And since Giant’s so giant, we got assigned together to the Colt-Browning.”

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

“Been in combat?” asked the LT, adding, “Me either,” when the Privates shook their heads.

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 AEF Corporal, ready to shoot, guarding the roadblock.

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

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

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

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

“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

“I don’t have time for this shit,” said Larry van der Bix, as he rushed to keep up with his Chief of Staff in the Long Beach City Hall parking garage. “I’ve got to pick up a big order at Philippe’s to say farewell.”

“Larry, I know you love your friend, but please show a little more on priorities,” said Chief of Staff Jeanine Howard. “And since you never tell anyone who to add to the schedule, I have no idea who’s upstairs.”

“It’s probably *him*,” said Larry, as he bolted into full speed.

“Councilman!” screamed Jeanine, running to chase him to City Hall, where two police officers immediately each drew a sidearm and yelled, “Halt!”

Larry kept running, but each officer laughed.

“Hey’a Councilman,” chuckled security, holstering weapons, as Larry kept running to the elevators.

“Wipe... your... face,” said Jeanine, jumping into the closing elevator door to catch up with the perspiring dork.

Larry didn’t take a packet of disinfectants, but galloped when the elevator opened, and his Chief of Staff again chased the Councilman, as they crossed the horse-shoe of political offices encircling the top floor of City Hall.

The furious Councilman stormed past the mask-wearing Mayor and frantic staffers watching coverage of “open the economy” protests in Huntington Beach.

Larry swung open the door to his Second District office.

“The Governor says you’re expecting him,” said press secretary Maryann Moore, who pointed to his personal office, “and he won’t talk to the Mayor.”

“I knew it,” barked Larry, rushing to his personal office. “Call the Police!”

“And make him more angry?” said field deputy and photographer Justin Rudd. “There’s already no ashtray.”

The Mayor burst into the 2nd District office, but was politely blocked by the smiling field deputy, while his boss ran through the door to his personal office.

The dork and his Chief of Staff found the gigantic athlete-turned-movie-star-turned-politician resting at the Councilman’s conference table.

Larry slammed the door, almost striking Mayor Anthony “Tony” Kim in the face.

California's former Governor – wearing a modified facemask that allowed him to smoke a cigar – was watching FOX coverage on the mounted television showing maskless white protesters tromping about at the base of the Huntington Beach Pier.

“Arnold Spankergrüber!” gasped Jeanine Howard.

“I am sent by *Tom Producer Man*, who wants you to help *That Jon Guy* make fun of the President,” said the former California Governor, his boots resting on the table, alongside a Stetson hat wrapped in ribbon, with a lottery ticket tucked into the brim.

“Get out!” yelled Larry.

“You are super-doooper rich, but I do not want you to be only *Mr. Sidekick Man!*” quickly added the movie star, jumping to his feet and grabbing the cowboy hat, as the sweating dork lunged toward the conference table. “We can be *Three Caballeros.*”

“I told you, ‘No!’ ” barked Larry, grabbing and throwing the remote.

“Ha! Funny! Fantastic!” laughed Arnold Spankergrüber, behaving as one when teaching a kindergartner to exercise. “We’d be the *Four Caballeros.*”

“No means no!” screamed Larry, as the Mayor pounded on the locked office door.

“You’ve *talked* to him?” gasped Jeanine, as the two politicians ran in circles.

“Why does not one believe me about Arnold?” gasped back the dork.

“Invest in making America laugh again, and we can beat *Mr. Bully Hate Man*, who is *so fat* and *very not strong!*” exclaimed the weightlifter, as he chomped his cigar and winked to the Chief of Staff, finishing another lap around the conference table.

“Get out of my office!” yelled the Councilman, running out of breath.

“Arnold Spankergrüber *calls* you?” asked Jeanine.

“I make *The Fantastic* happen,” said the Governor, to Jeanine Howard, as he completed another lap. “Bankroll *That Jon Guy’s fantastic* reality show and Hollywood can make you *fantastically* rich and famous... win or lose.”

“He *itches* stuff to you?” asked Jeanine.

Arnold made another pass, blinking as he handed the gift-wrapped Stetson with the May 26th Mega-Million ticket to the Chief of Staff. “Who doesn’t love a winner?”

“Anyone who didn’t vote for the President,” opined the Chief of Staff.

Outside the locked door, Mayor Tony Kim demanded entry.

“Tonight’s ‘Blinker Day’ makes a fantastic pilot,” said the former Governor.

Jeanine Howard stared at the hat in her hand.

Showing no social distance, Arnold used the Chief of Staff as a body block against Larry's charge. "Each woman you hire such a *Super-Cute Girl*," said Arnold, again flirtatiously winking to Jeanine. "And I am *Mr. Divorced Fantastic*."

Jeanine immediately and fully slapped the former Governor.

"Why did you hit me?" exclaimed Arnold.

"Quid pro quo," replied Jeanine.

"Get out or I'll call the police," growled Larry.

* * *

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, and indicated that he was obviously resting a huge video camera on his buff shoulders.

"Wrong apartment," 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 awarding a huge, ornate latch-key around her son's neck. "Our dream-come-true story will make people move to Maine."

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.

"Take two..." said the wild haired interviewer, her face mask bobbing with each word.

"This is Karen J. Joplin, and I just rode as far from Maine as you can, and *still* be on the continental United States."

"Wait, I didn't say 'yes' to anything," said Lori Lewis, whose family had enlisted as sailors, soldiers and Marines since arriving in Long Beach before the Spanish-American war.

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

"Why, *you* must be the lucky contest winner!" mechanically repeated Karen.

“We get the keys to the Harbor House Inn with my essay on love, marriage and devotion,” 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 either Larry or the family’s chauffeur enjoyed the privilege of driving her at 5 am each morning for practice.

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

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

“You really should prioritize time better,” said the wild haired woman, walking inside as the out-of-work comedian took the call.

“A dollar a minute?” asked the out-of-work comedian, taking off his mask, and using the patio as an ocean-view stage. “So the President’s taking a cheap flight on British Airways...”

“I’m not impressed by his choices,” shrugged Karen Joplin, “but he’s a perfect driver.”

Billie McGee told the camera about hijackers demanding that *they* be the one who punishes the President for messing up *their* world.

Lori and December stared at his incredibly good looks

“At least driving runs in the family,” said Karen, “since his mother and grandfather drove an ambulance and he’s done comedy tours for years.”

The cameraman delivered the punch line about an angry sword-carrying old Queen.

“Too bad he’s not funny,” said Lori.

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

Billie McGee smiled, thanked the called, hung up, ended the video, and chuckled.

“Definitely uploadable.” He put on his mask and maintained social distance in the living room.

The three women watched the man walk toward the boy on the rug, who wore a latch-key chain.

“Nice key.... Hey, what’s your comic book?” The boy continued didn’t look up from *Sgt. Rock*, though the comedian studied the cover. “My grandfather was Sergeant Rock.”

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

“Excuse me, Ma’am,” said the cameraman, as he politely passed Lori. “Or, Sir.”

“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 would any second-rate politician – to present a box of the Original Philippe’s sandwiches, pickles, coleslaw, soup, salad and slices of pie.

“COVID, Larry!” barked Lori, pointing to the Maine duo. “You’ll get the Governor sick!”

Karen and Billie 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 Billie McGee, as everyone sat in a wide circle on the huge balcony patio, with the Maine duo soaking up the late-May 2020 sunshine.

“Clean the bottle,” ordered the 50ish hippy, tossing a packet of disinfectant wipes.

The cameraman obeyed, so as to not piss off a boss he most commonly calls, Miss Karen.

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

Lori and Larry quickly looked at one another.

Unmentioned was that each woman agreed to go with Larry a decade ago, on a road trip to cash his massive lottery winnings, and neither had been told the other had been invited, nor had Lori been told that the dork was 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 two big perks for my biggest fan.”

* * *

“I don’t want to talk about our personal life,” said Lori, offering Original Philippe’s to distract the duo basking in the late-May 2020 sunshine.

“Oh, right,” said December, quickly turning toward her son, to urge that Riley wag the key. “Winning a new future together is the big story.”

“May I?” asked Billie, as he calmly shot a close-up of Riley’s latch-key chain.

“Don’t *scare* the child,” instructed Karen Joplin.

* * *

December – eye-poppingly beautiful in her early twenties – welcomed fans to her webcam, as she 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 such that each breast slipped out with a silent “pop.” Chatting with fans, she smiled 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 coughed more.

“Lots more to see, guys,” said December, as she switched off the sound.

* * *

“So you don’t want an ‘introduction story’ for the interviews?” asked Karen Joplin, enjoying the privilege of basking in the sunshine.

Lori looked sternly to her wife.

“My essay on love, marriage and devotion isn’t about *how* people meet, just that they are devoted to a life together,” said December, as she mechanically prepared a plate for her son.

“Maybe the key is a fun angle,” added Billie McGee, again pointing to the chain dangling around the nine-year-old’s neck.

“This is not *your* interview,” said the woman with wild hair.

“It’s a key my great-grandfather, Carl van der Bix, gave to his Danish ballerina wife in 1920 to welcome her to Naples Island,” said Larry, as the cameraman scrawled notes onto a pad. “They met when he flew planes for the Army during World War One.”

“Thank you, Councilman, for being *so* helpful,” said the cameraman, after recording the detailed response and pocketing his notepad. “That name, though. . . . Seems like I’ve heard it.”

December offered a plate to her son, as Karen gave orders to the cameraman.

“Don’t put that away until you get proper spelling,” said the retired Master Sergeant.

* * *

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.

Subscribers of the 2010 webcam watched – but could not hear – the two women battling, arms swinging, clearly yelling, 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 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, neither willing to stop without total victory.

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

* * *

The second-rate politician encouraged everyone to eat at Philippe's.

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

“Don't talk like that,” shot December.

The nine-year-old watched another showdown between his parents.

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

“My grandfather fought ‘Over There,’” said Billie, as he smeared mustard on his sandwich.

“I'm tired of hearing about your grandfather,” snipped Karen Joplin.

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

Chapter Four – Surf City USA Does Its COVID Thing

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

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

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

“When my husband wins a medal at home,” replied the wife.

The duo from Maine waved from the lobby of the beachfront apartment.

“Oh fuck,” moaned Lori, pulling down the U-Haul’s cargo door.

“This Master Sergeant does not ‘hitch’ a ride,” growled Karen Joplin, to her cameraman.

“You’re the one who sold the idea of a cross-country interview trip to the Tourism Board, Miss Karen,” said the out-of-work comedian.

“Just do your job,” said the woman in her 50s with wild hair, as she approached Lori Lewis. “Hello... We are covering a ‘lost-tourism’ angle of COVID...”

“Like I care,” replied Lori, as she locked the cargo door and turned to her best friend.

The hippy silently ordered the cameraman to capture video of Larry saying farewell.

“You’re *lucky* you get to fight with your wife,” said the 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 in high school. “No one married *me*.”

“Honorable guys don’t always finish last,” said Lori, hugging the dork. “Your grandfather was almost 30.”

“Oh, your friend is so right,” smiled the 50s white woman from Maine, interjecting with the farewell, and speaking to the camera.

“Stay the fuck outta my way,” shot back Lori, as the cameraman politely stopped shooting. Lori finished her farewell to Larry and wiped a rare tear, as December waved to her biggest fan.

Lori climbed into the driver’s seat.

“We can cover gas, food, and lodging with a VISA card provided by the Tourism Board,” said Karen Joplin. “And he’s never gotten a ticket.”

* * *

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

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

“My clients want footage of the Huntington Beach Pier,” said Karen, sitting next to the passengers window.

Most vehicles 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.”

“Can Mr. Riley also shoot videos?” asked Billie, who sat next to the nine-year-old.

With a silent nod from December, Billie handed a small camera to the child and pointed to the oceanfront bluffs, with people walking dogs, or riding bikes, or carrying a surfboard.

“Someone called me, ‘Mister,’” said Riley, as he pointed the camera to bumper-to-bumper traffic slowly moved between 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 traffic or stopped vehicles.

Billie handed his own portable camera to Karen, as a police officer waved the U-Haul to stop to the right.

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

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

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

“A lot of people in there,” said the officer, eyeing Billie. “Whose boy is that?”

“This is *my son!*” shot back December, protecting Riley tightly from prowling owls.

“I don’t think he meant...,” started Karen.

Billie stayed motionless.

Lori kept her hands on the wheel.

After a bit more investigation, 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.

“Why aren’t you shooting, too?” asked Riley.

“Life is unpredictable,” replied Billie. “People don’t always think I’m holding a camera.”

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

Riley aimed his small 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 are carrying guns, like Michigan!” perked Riley Beach, aiming the camera to the group of unmasked white middle-aged protesters waving to honking cars, and lofting signs that read, “Don’t Cancel My Golf Season,” and “Fauci Lied, Main Street Died,” and “#FakeCrisis.” One smiling wavy-haired blond teen held a surfboard, with “Let Me Surf Again” painted across it.

“Don’t talk about guns,” said December, snatching the *Sgt. Rock* comic book from her son, and stuffing it behind her husband’s back. “And don’t give him those.”

“And do not say ‘Gun’ to a stranger,” calmly instructed Karen, to both Billie and the child.

“QAnon!” 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 police officers waved the vehicle to the right side of Pacific Coast Highway, one block from Main Street.

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

“Calm quiet peaceful,” repeated Billie McGee, quietly reciting his personal mantra.

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

“Yeh, four-plus-one,” said the officer, into a shoulder phone, as Lori offered her license. “All the way, please.” Lori lowered the window fully, as the second officer tapped on the other side. “And the passenger’s side.”

Each officer rapidly examined the five before focusing on the cameraman, as hundreds of tanned smiling white people strolled along PCH or clustered outside Jack’s Surf Shop or crossed the controlled Main Street intersection to join jolly white protesters at the base of the HB Pier.

Only the relaxed caucasian law enforcement officers controlling traffic wore masks.

“My son just likes taking videos,” nervously said December, as the second officer lifted a sidearm, while Riley aimed the small camera to the light-skinned mass of humanity at the Pier.

“Where’s the father?” asked the officer holding a sidearm.

“Daddy’s right here,” said Riley, aiming the camera to show Lori talking to the first officer.

“You girls moving into Downtown?” asked the officer holding Lori’s license, but still focused on Billie.

“Driving to Beach Blvd to catch the 405,” replied Lori, waiting for her license.

“And we’re helping them move,” quickly added Karen. “He helps unload.”

“Uh, thanks Miss Karen,” said Billie, meekly, but motionless.

“Gotta make sure no one’s snatching kids,” said the officer, looking directly at the child.

“And is everything okay, son?”

Riley continued looking into the camera, until turning to his mother. “Are they nice?”

Billie McGee silently chanted his mantra.

The officers looked to one another.

“Oh, everything is fine,” opined Karen, exercising the privilege of issuing judgement.

Lori bristled at the hippy’s comment, as Riley looked up to his mother.

“We’re regulating traffic to protect the public during a legal protest at Main Street,” said the first officer, as the other holstered his sidearm. “Remain in place.”

Lori took her license back and raised the window.

The two masked officers walked away.

“No!” whispering Billie McGee, as Riley quickly opened the glove compartment and reached for the other video camera. “Mister Riley is our cameraman now.”

Riley closed the glove compartment, and smiled. “And now I’m a man.”

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 and the sweet life of privilege,” said Billie, as a middle-aged white guy pushed a wheelchair that appeared to carry a Real Doll decked in Flag-style attire and 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 voted Lincoln in 1860 and mustered with the Illinois 113th Volunteer Infantry, as part of a family that had enlisted for 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.

“And it’s so hot,” said Billie, exaggeratingly wiping his brow. “Phew, nice A/C.”

Karen Joplin looked at the visor mirror, adjusted her floral mask, and tapped on Billie.

“Maybe Mr. Riley,” said Billie, with discomfort encouraging the child to aim his camera.

“This is Karen Joplin and guess who’s doing *their* Maine thing by the Surf City seashore?” she said, motioning to tanned smiling white protesters celebrating freedom at the HB Pier.

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

* * *

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

The cashier confirmed the \$30 order, returned the Maine Tourism Board VISA card and handed three large bags and two drink trays.

“Shopping bag?” playfully asked Billie, before switching to a silly female-sounding voice, “No, just browsing.”

December and Riley laughed, as 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 food to her son.

“Sleeping bag?” asked Billie, quickly delivering the punch line, “No, just resting.”

The three family members laughed at the comedian’s second joke, and then together laughed again about Lori having laughed at all.

“Thank you for being so fun,” smiled December, handing a sandwich to Billie McGee.

“My job is to make people smile,” said the out-of-work comedian.

“Those were very insulting,” shot back Karen.

“Just my ‘bag jokes,’ Miss Karen,” quickly replied Billie. “Ha... funny.”

“They’re not funny to me!” said a white woman exercising her privilege to be offended. For several minutes, everyone silently chomped and sipped and stared out the window.

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 almost 100% coverage, and displayed a printed banner that read, “COVID-19 is a lie.”

“Trash bag?” added the comedian. “No, I like the President.”

* * *

The U-Haul slowly approached the southbound onramp to the 405 Fwy, as police ordered drivers to slowly obey a line of cones to protect a crowd of white protesters near the onramp.

“Can I be the cameraman again?” asked Riley.

“If your Mom says, ‘Yes,’” said Billie.

“I’m very proud of you, Little One,” calmly said December.

Riley Beach smiled and shot video of a professionally-printed sign 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, into the camera, motioning signs that 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, ‘Will April’s COVID showers allow May’s reopened flowers?’” asked the wild haired woman, as protesters waved and smiled. “As Maine goes, so goes Surf City.”

December bristled when a protestor ran toward the U-Haul and waved his fist to Billie, screaming, “Pedophile!”

“It’s hard to breath in this thing,” said Karen, showing no interest in the screaming protestor, as she slid the mask down, “and that’s coming from an NCO.”

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™, Billie McGee again held a camera, which he carefully aimed so as to not show 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.

“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 don’t go there,” said Riley Lewis Carrera Beach, slowly. “Daddy doesn’t want us to.”

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

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

Chapter Five – Get COVID’s Kicks On Route 66

“I know you’re alone in there,” shouted Long Beach Mayor Tony Kim, as he begged Councilman Larry van der Bix to unlock his personal office door.

Inside, Larry stood at a full-length winder, while Jeanine Howard lowered the volume on the large-screen TV with coverage of a May surge in death from COVID-19.

“What do you mean, ‘Maybe call Lori and December?’” said the Chief of Staff.

“The show can be shot at December’s new house in Maine, since That Jon Guy needs to register to vote in another state,” said Larry, staring out the window, and watching cargo ships float to America’s busiest ports. “The Constitution requires it.”

The Mayor continued pounding.

“Where are your priorities?” begged Jeanine.

“Maine would shows *independence*,” said Larry.

“Everyone calls you ‘crazy,’ so there’s already a push to recall you!” said Jeanine. “Since you won the damned lottery, it might not mean anything to *you*, but the staff will be *fired* if you get *booted* out... for some... TV show in Maine.”

“It’s not like I’m *moving* to Maine,” said Larry, as the phone on his desk buzzed. “I’d be registered at the Villa Rivera and I’d fly home... or do Zoom... for meetings.”

“So you’re not only crazy, but insane enough to fly during COVID,” said Jeanine, picking up the call after the fifth ring. “Who is it, Maryann?” The Chief of Staff scowled before offering the phone. “The Maine Tourism Board on line two.”

“Oh, Arnold told me he’d call them,” said Larry, quickly taking the phone. “Arnold offered a contract? Did you tell Lori and December? Oh, maybe don’t yet.” Larry hung up.

Larry smiled after successfully exercising another privilege – to decide when to tell others that he was making big decisions for them – as the Mayor kept pounding.

“Answer the door,” said the dork.

“I’m picking up my kid, so I’ll see you at the Council meeting,” said Jeanine, swinging open the personal office door.

Mayor Tony Kim and his own Chief of Staff tumbled into the private office.

* * *

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.

"What'cha reading?" asked Riley, pointing to a thin tattered booklet Billie was studying.

"My Grandfather's *Green Book*," said Billie, showing a travel guide from decades ago. "When I was your age, Sergeant Rock drove me everywhere."

"Me, too!" smiled Riley, waving Lori's copy of "Our Army at War," a DC comic book, featuring "The Four Faces of Sgt. Rock."

"No, John Rock, of Rutland VT, is my muleskinner grandfather," said Billie.

"Was he *ever* one of the four faces?" asked the child, pointing to "Sgt. Rock's Easy Co."

"He got three promotions in a month, but even comics are a segregated Army," said Billie.

"Maybe another word," suggested Lori, a former Sergeant, making not order.

"Sure... when he returned from France, Rock drove everywhere," swooned the comedian. "Even to his 100th birthday party, cuz he refused to let a French Ambassador chauffeur his family, and he *still* got stopped for driving one mile over the speed limit."

"Why would the Ambassador of France...," started December. "Wait, that's a joke, right?"

"My grandfather drove for the French in two wars," said Billie, opening the guide, to show scraps of paper carefully-and-completely taped to the inside back cover, presenting a typed order dated September 8th 1918 and signed by an America General, promoting John Rock to Corporal. "When I got his *Green Book* after he died, I made it my mission to find places that are still open."

"What's a segregated army?" asked the nine-year-old, looking at the comic book.

"Those are armies from very long ago," calmly instructed Master Sergeant Karen Joplin, before disdainfully turning to her out-of-work comedian. "Why do you waist everyone's time talking about the past?"

"The past is never dead," cited Billie McGee, in his own requiem. "It's not even past."

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.

The nine-year-old put down *Sgt. Rock*, to look at old tape that bound together old tears. "What's a muleskinner?"

“Did he name you?” asked December, glancing at *The Negro Travelers’ Green Book*, with the cover showing a San Francisco cable car with print that read, “Travel-Wise People Travel by The Green Book.”

“My mom didn’t like my dad, so she honored Sergeant Rock’s favorite singer,” said Billie, “since I’d get guff not matter what name I got.”

“Sometimes marriage people just don’t like each other,” said December, casting a scowl.

“She certainly had a nice voice,” opined Karen, “even if she was a drug addict.”

“So what’s a muleskinner?” repeated the nine-year-old.

Billie lofted the guide, to show a yellowed newspaper clip carefully taped to the back cover, of a column by Ernie Pyle about Captain Henry Wascow being carried by mule down a mountain. “Muleskinning at Anzio got him promoted to Sergeant.”

“You shouldn’t expect Maine’s newest family to waste time on your personal mission,” again snapped Karen Joplin.

“Sounds like an honorable journey,” said Lori, assessing Billie’s story.

“It would be great if we could stop along Route 66 to see if original places are still around,” said the comedian. “I’d cover the gas.”

“We’re driving that direction anyway,” said Lori, pointed to the San Bernardino interchange that connects with Interstate 15.

Billie McGee smiled as broadly as Karen Joplin scowled. As the COVID news continued, Billie returned to studying Route 66, humming Nat Cole’s smash hit that had been written when Bobby Troup merely repeated names from the map.

“Even if your mom didn’t like your dad, it’s nice how you care about family,” cooed December, again stroking her husband’s hand and hugged her comic-book-reading son.

“I hardly remember him and I still don’t like him,” said Billie.

Karen turned up the radio.

“This is medical tyranny,” said someone in the 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?”

“You obviously look nothing like my husband, but you act just like Bear,” said Karen, resting a privileged finger on the Chicago Cubs patch. “He never listened, either.”

* * *

Lori Lewis – who hadn't stopped since entering the 405 freeway in Huntington Beach – exited Interstate 40, at Barstow Road.

Everyone remained silent, as Lori approached a gas station and fast food joints.

Billie scanned the *Green Book* for Barstow.

“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.

“Life can be dangerous anywhere,” added the cameraman.

“You paint a dark picture for such a bright smile,” growled Karen.

“Duh,” said Riley, looked at Billie. “It's because he has dark skin.”

“No, Little One, I think he means, ‘Bad things can happen even to very nice person,’” said December, turning to gauge the comedian's response.

“That's why I work to make people laugh,” said Billie, smiling.

Chapter Six – Arnold’s Privilege Is “Ha,” “Funny,” “Fantastic”

“Will the Clerk read the next item,” said Mayor Tony Kim, looking to his agenda, and not seeing California’s former Governor – exercising the ultimate privilege, of being a superstar – enter the huge open tent used for Council meetings during COVID-19.

City Councilmembers, staffers and the audience sitting on socially-distanced chairs watched the red-carpet entry of Arnold Spankergrüber, as the weightlifter-turned-movie-star-turned-governor performed for TV crews he had tipped about his attendance, blowing cigar smoke from his fantastically-designed face mask.

“Oh no!” groaned Councilman Larry van der Bix, as the Mayor looked up, and quickly turned to the dork who had spent most of his first year in office riding a horse across America on a personal mission to help his best friend, Lori Lewis, rather than meet with constituents or attend community events.

“*I’m back!*” announced Arnold Spankergrüber, flirtatiously working the crowd, waving and posing for socially-distanced selfies, until he reached the speaker’s platform, still wearing his fantastic mask.

Every elected official on the dais stared at Larry.

The Mayor tapped his gavel, quieting the audience. “Yes, I see the Governor... Mr. Former Governor... is here for... his *unplanned* visit... so, Sir, yes, please go ahead.”

“It is *only eight o’clock*, but COVID reminds us, ‘It gets *late* early out there,’” said the athlete, quoting another athlete, while speaking to the FOX camera.

No one at the dais smiled over whether Yogi Berra’s teachings directly applied to a partisan battle over face masks.

“Long Beach is so *fantastic*,” started the former Governor.

Sitting at the dais, Councilman Larry van der Bix moved his Stetson hat away from his laptop to check the time.

“*Fantastic* apartments and *fantastic* restaurants and *fantastic* jobs are *fantastic* reasons why Long Beach is so *fantastic*, even in this very-not *fantastic* COVID,” said Arnold Spankergrüber.

Larry pulled several lottery tickets from his wallet.

“And how *fantastic* is Mr. Cambodia Mayor Man,” said Arnold, to the nation’s first elected Cambodian-American. “It is *very fantastic*, since more Cambodians live in Long Beach than anywhere by Cambodia.”

Tony Kim politely pressed his hands together and nodded.

One of the city’s three African-American members of Council – whose 6th District held the largest Cambodian population of any district in America – pressed his hands and bowed to Tony Kim.

Larry surfed his personal phone for lottery numbers, comparing 34 52 58 59 62 shown on the lottery homepage with tickets from his wallet, crumpling each.

“I am here to thank *Lucky Lottery Larry*,” said Arnold, “for tonight’s debate on his ‘Blinker Day’ that will make this *fantastic* city the first in America with a *fantastic* ordinance to tell everyone how *fantastic* it is to use their blinkers.”

Larry pulled the Mega Millions gift tucked into the Stetson hat, with his name scrawled in red pen.

“*Every car has one... So use it!*” said Arnold Spankergrüber, quoting Larry’s line. “Ha! Funny! Fantastic!”

“Again!” gasped Larry, comparing his 04 Mega number with the homepage.

“Okay, I’ll say it, ‘*Fantastic*,’” purred Arnold. “I love saying, ‘*Fantastic!*’”

“I won *again!*” exclaimed Larry, waving the gift ticket. “Again! I won it all!”

The audience erupted. Some hooted, “Ride ’em, Cowboy!” Others chanted, “Lar-RY!”

“Even during chaos, luck can change life,” observed Mayor Tony Kim, who arrived in Long Beach when Ronald Reagan was president, with his family among thousands fleeing genocide that slew millions on the Killing Fields of Cambodia.

“The gift I *gave* you?” gasped the former Governor.

“You wrote my name,” said Larry, waving the May 26th 2020 ticket.

“It was *my* pen!”

Chapter Seven – Driving Across The COVID Desert

“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.

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

Karen whispered to Billie.

“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.

* * *

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

“Your wife’s essay is a *big* story to promote our state,” said Karen, bargaining for sleep.

“The Tourism Board is *happy* to cover gas, food, and lodging.”

“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 Long Beach.

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

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

* * *

Lori parked in an empty Motel 6 lot, in Winona Arizona, donned her mask, climbed out, and walked to a locked lobby door. After repeatedly pounding, someone appeared behind the lobby counter. Rather than opening the door, the clerk motioned to the phone number on a window.

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

“Obviously,” said Lori. “There’s no one here.”

“Text your VISA number and I’ll unlock two rooms,” 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 each rolled a suitcase towards one of opened motel rooms. “Rooms cost more to hold four people.”

“He works for me,” assured the woman with wild hair.

“Sure, right, whatever blows your hair back,” shrugged the clerk, as the Maine duo took one room and two women with a kid took the other.

“Well, good night,” said December, carrying an overnight bag.

Riley smiled and waved to the duo from Maine, who each waved back.

“Bear rejected my orders all the time,” said Karen, crossing the threshold.

“I pay attention to everything you say, Miss Karen,” said Billie, shutting the door.

* * *

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

“Uh... hello,” weakly replied Larry, finally home after a long Council meeting that seemed more like a reality TV show. “If this is Arnold Spankergrüber, stop waking me up!”

“I can’t win this battle,” said the decorated soldier and Olympian, looking into her window to see December and Riley asleep.

“You don’t need to *win*,” said the dork. “You just gotta be happy.”

Lori peered in the neighboring window, and saw the Maine duo making out on first base. “Easier said than done.”

* * *

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

Lori finished a third set of 24 pushups, as her phone buzzed. “It’s Larry,” she said, quickly walking to the door.

“You need your mask,” said December, lewdly eying her husband’s chest.

“There’s no one else here except the Dynamic Duo,” moaned the soldier, before surrendering to grab a mask.

“How’s Day Two starting?” asked Larry. “Gotta be better than mine.”

“No swimming pool,” said Lori, as the duo from Maine stepped out of their motel room.

“At least you don’t have Arnold Spankergrüber making fun of you,” moaned the dork.

Lori covered the phone, as the duo waved.

“We’ll pick up some Denny’s,” said the wild haired woman.

“Choo-choo,” playfully tooted Billie McGee, mimicking a train.

“You know that it’s hard for me to hear that sound,” said Karen, to her cameraman.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Miss Karen,” said Billie, as the duo walked off.

“Dancing with Arnold Spankergrüber would be a vacation,” grumbled Lori.

“Very good to know,” said the dork, in a cryptic view of privilege.

* * *

December sat on her husband’s feet and dried her coal-black hair, as Lori did sit-ups.

“Breakfast!” said Karen Joplin, tapping on the window, as her cameraman lifted large Denny’s bags outside the motel room. “Courtesy of the Maine Tourism Board.”

The married couple didn’t look up.

Riley Beach rushed to open the door.

“Plastic bag?” asked Billie, while washing his hands after setting three bags onto the table. Delivering with a female voice, he tossed the punch line. “No, I’ve got cash”

The family laughed.

“To-go bag?” added Billie, finishing flirtatiously. “Where do you suggest?”

The parents laughed, and then all three laughed together when Riley laughed himself.

“Make ’em laugh, make ’em laugh, make ’em laugh,” sang the comedian.

“That was inappropriate,” opined Miss Karen, putting down a drink tray.

* * *

“Pardon if it’s a little personal, but why not visit Disneyland?” asked Karen, as she poured half of the packets of syrup onto her pancakes.

“You have to 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 be someone else,” said Billie, drinking iced tea.

“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, next to Lori and December and Riley, awaiting the early-morning start of Day Two.

Billie stood outside the passengers’ window, making a discrete 360-degree scan, as would any prey fearing owls, the bird viewed as smart, but more accurately is seen as a ferocious predator. Seeing no police, Billie hoisted the camera and shot.

“Here we are on America’s famous Route 66, along with Maine’s newest homeowners,” said the maskless interviewer, warmly motioning to the two women and the nine-year-old boy.

“Maine’s population is growing, but it’s not because we’re having lots of kids.”

“Love and devotion means caring about family,” said December, hugging her son.

“Winning the Harbor House means that Riley gets a new future, forever.”

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

Riley whimpered.

Billie McGee kept the camera focused on the interview, while peering for owls.

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

As her wife kept talking for the interview, Lori’s eyes glazed about a future she didn’t want. Instead, the soldier replayed the nightmare of a wedding night she wished not to remember.

* * *

“I wanted this to be our first dinner as officially married newlyweds,” said the young December, swishing her modest-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,” 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 drink.”

“It’s, um... something else,” said December, gripped Lori’s hand.

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, knowingly. "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 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. "That's why we're having this 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 December, as Lori revved the U-Haul. “Riley can help make America’s oldest population smile again.”

“No comment,” growled Lori, her hands tightly gripping the U-Haul’s steering wheel.

“Everybody wants to make dreams come true,” said December, miffed at her husband. “Riley is now privileged to get a house that will be his forever.”

“No comment,” repeated the soldier, “except stop twisting MAGA.”

“Show Carl van der Bix’s key,” said December, encouraged Riley to dangle the ornate key that Larry had given.

“I *know* that name,” said Billie McGee, as he kept shooting, while scanning for owls.

* * *

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 smiling waitress again approached the table.

“You think?” said Lori.

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

The waitress 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.

* * *

“These fights feel like a reality TV show,” grumbled Lori, driving away from Motel 6.

The Dynamic Duo looked to one another, but Karen offered no mention about her contract talks with Arnold Spankergrüber and Tom Pranks, for a show with Jon Stuart.

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

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

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

“Right,” said Lori, staring at a duo she had watched make out on first base the night before.

“Don’t worry,” said Billie McGee. “Everybody edits personal details.”

* * *

“If you want to throw in the towel because I had sex before arriving in Afghanistan, okay, tell me!” growled the pregnant newlywed, pushing the elevator, 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.

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 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 into the ocean of 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 can only be our baby, now.” December wiped away tears. “You’ll 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.”

The LT in her dress greens 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....”

* * *

Billie McGee looked up from his *Green Book* after gauging his location in Arizona.

“The people of Maine want more young couples with happy kids,” said Karen Joplin, looking to a pair of beautiful white women privileged to enjoy luxury together.

“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.

Chapter Eight – When COVID Meets Chaos

“May I?” said Billie 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. Billie 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.

“Don’t any stations play *music* anymore,” said Lori, lowering the volume, while a doctor from a small hospital talked of cots lined row upon row in the few rooms available for 22 patients who had tested positive the night before.

“Stay cool,” said Billie, chanting his mantra, as a New Mexico highway patrol vehicle slowly paralleled the U-Haul, with one deputy studying the 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.

“I’ll do the talking,” said the wild haired woman, looking with privilege thru her sunglasses as Lori pulled to the side. “We are driving with an Olympian.”

Lori Lewis scowled.

“Getting no kicks on Route 66,” muttered Billie, as two deputies with open holsters walked on either side of the U-Haul.

* * *

“So you’re *famous* somehow?” said one deputy, examining Lori’s California license, while the other rested his hand on his sidearm.

“London,” stuttered Lori.

“She won four Silver and a Bronze at the 2012 Olympics,” proudly declared the wild haired white woman. “And now they’re moving to Maine.”

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

“We are driving across the country,” said December, hugging her son.

“The boy is *your* family?” replied the deputy.

“Oh,” injected Karen Joplin, to rapidly correct an unspoken assumption, “he’s my driver.”

Billie silently lived his Mantra.

“Why isn’t the boy driving?” said the deputy holding Lori’s license, as the other lifted his personal sidearm.

“Are they nice, too?” asked Riley Beach.

“Oh, they’re just doing their job,” responded the hippy.

“But I don’t know *how* to drive,” said the nine-year-old.

“We’re okay, Little One,” said December, before looking as a stern mother must directly to the deputy holding her husband’s license. “Our son starts school next week in Maine.”

After a pause, the deputy returned Lori’s license. “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 the DC Comics.

Karen elbowed Billie, half her age. “Why don’t you start?”

“Ten years and I’m still an opening act?” said the cameraman.

“So you perform?” asked December.

“My Dad wanted me to have a steady life pulling concrete in Portland,” said Billie, “but mom and Robert McGee divorced, so I grew up on John Rock’s maple tree farm in Vermont.

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

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

“Sergeant Rock wanted me to consider the Army, but I was just a kid,” said the out-of-work comedian. “Stand-up comedy gave me a path away from the thunder and ice.”

“Did you *want* to be in the Army?” asked Riley, looking for his father’s reaction.

“No, I wanted to catch the Ethan Allen for a five-hour train ride to do shows in NYC,” said Billie McGee, “but he gave me a *Green Book* as a symbol of following my own path.”

“I spent twenty years in uniform, along with my sweetheart-turned-hermit husband,” said the woman with wild hair, taking the privilege to inject her own story.

“I know, Miss Karen,” politely said Billie. “You’ve said.”

“The last Army muleskinners were World War I,” said Lori, who earned a Unit Citation in Afghanistan, after the Obama Administration authorized female service personnel in combat.

“In World War Two, the Army ordered every muleskinner in America to enlist,” said Billie. “He moved supplies, ammunition and troops up and down the mountains.”

“How did he know mules if he was a driver?” said Karen, to trip the story.

“Even harvested in snow on the Green Mountains?” said Billie. “The French taught guns, but Doughboys made him peel potatoes.”

“Couldn’t have known,” said Lori respectfully.

“Ernie Pyle did,” added Billie, again tapping the back cover of the *Green Book*.

“That’s a very nice story,” opined Karen, “so you should be very proud.”

“Well. . . , thank you, Miss Karen,” said Billie McGee, politely exuding warmth to the woman paying his way.

“Okay, next story,” said December, quieting admiring the unemployed comedian. “Hermit husband, huh?”

“Bear wanted time alone when we lost our daughter,” said Karen, “so after we retired from Active Duty, I took PR gigs and he went into the forest.”

“I’m so sorry,” said December, immediately reaching out to the hippy.

The woman in her 50s quietly and demonstrably dabbed away tears.

“There is a bear in the woods,” said Billie McGee, humorously mimicking Ronald Reagan to lighten the mood.

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

“For some people, the bear is easy to see,” roared the grizzly. “Others don’t see it at all.”

“Bear lives close to the Harbor House,” said Karen, exercising the privilege of displaying irritation.

“A bear lives by our new house?” shot back December.

“My husband!” said Karen, fingers methodically resting on the Chicago patch. “When we lost our Cub, Bear retreated into the forest. . . for his *own* Maine thing.”

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

“I’m so sorry about your daughter.”

“There’s a lot to it. . . ,” slowly added the retired NCO, “maybe for another day.”

“I’m very sorry that we got you to bring up something so painful,” started Lori.

“Maybe it’s time for another funny story,” said Karen, making a handoff to the comedian, who didn’t skip a beat.

“Empty bag?” joked Billie. “No, I already went.”

Everyone except Karen laughed.

“When COVID emptied the clubs, Miss Karen hired me for the PR gigs,” said Billie.

“He is a very good driver,” said Karen, checking herself in the visor mirror. “He always maintains the *exact* speed limit.”

“Losing a child hurts forever,” said December, tears falling. “You’ll always feel empty.”

“Please, you don’t have to tell us really personal things,” said Lori, to the duo whom she had watched making out at Motel 6 the night before.

“We’re in the business of stories,” quickly added the comedian.

“If your husband lives in our forest, you can introduce him to tell us about the Island,” said December, resting her arm around her son.

“He’s not ready to fraternize with other parents,” said Karen, opining as judge and jury.

“Bear wanted to leave high school, so we cut a deal to graduate together, get married and enlist.” The hippy peered to Lori Lewis, who finished as an LT, after earning stripes to Sergeant First Class. “We made Master Sergeant, but when we lost the Cub, the Bear fell apart.”

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

“As big as a bear can be,” smiled Karen. “He’s a giant.”

“You did 20 years with Army haircuts and now you look like Janis Joplin?” said Lori.

“You can always dream of the life you wanted,” said Karen, flashing peace signs.

“Is there anything you want to tell us about your daughter?” politely asked December.

“Who she was.... What you want people to know?”

“Not every story needs to be told,” said Lori, to her wife.

“She got hit by a train in Chicago,” said Karen, slowly, methodically caressing the Cubs. “Sometimes, even 9-1-1 can’t rescue a military brat.”

“Am I a military brat?” asked the nine-year-old.

“Your Daddy is a veteran,” said December, “and you are a wonderful son.”

“Is that why Daddy treats me like a brat?” added Riley Lewis Carrera Beach.

“Maybe another story,” said December, quickly.

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

“PR and comedy come down to making people smile,” said Billie. “It’s about confidence.”

“Sometimes I wish we were back in uniform, with our Cub,” said Karen Joplin.

Lori touched her wife’s cheek to wipe away a tear, but said nothing.



Patient Zero of the “Spanish Flu” was a Kansas farmboy infected by a wild bird and carried the influenza to Camp Funston in Spring 1918, where it immediately killed hundreds of soldiers, before being moved across America by train, and to Europe on ships that carried troops “Over There,” to fight in what was called as The Great War. Within two years, 100 million people worldwide died from a pandemic that became the most brutal killer ever to strike the Industrial Age.

Chapter Nine – And The Slog ‘Over There’

“Mustered as a sweating grunt when Teddy Roosevelt sent the Army Corps of Engineers to build the Panama Canal,” said the driver, staying close behind a truck packed with Doughboys.

“Pulled Sergeant with Pershing’s hunt for Pancho Villa.”

“I voted for Teddy’s ‘Bull Moose’ party,” replied Carl, referring to 1912, his first election, one year after Earl and Carl became the 87th and 88th Americans to earn a federal license to fly.

“I don’t care who runs in 1920, so long as I live long enough to vote,” said the driver.

“We won’t reach voting age by 1920,” said the enormous 17-year-old rifleman.

“My best friend voted Taft and told me I was crazy to join the Air Service,” said Carl.

“My Mom, too; she’s afraid I’ll crash and die,” said the 21-year-old LT. “Can’t vote then.”

“Crashing’s not so bad if you survive,” said the driver, “cuz then you go home.”

“We’ll make it back, Giant,” said Johnnie, looking up to his friend, who sat slightly higher so as to man the elevated Colt-Browning heavy machinegun. “We could be in the trenches.”

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

“At least biplane pilots don’t live in a trench with mud and gas attacks and cannons,” said Private Johnnie, looking jealously at the LT. “Sure hope we don’t.”

“I just don’t want to be an amputee,” said Private Giant.

“Enemy!” yelled the driver, speeding the vehicle. “Hold tight!”

“What?” asked the LT.

“German planes!” barked Carl, his eyes rapidly scanning, like a hungry owl seeking prey.

“It won’t fire!” yelled Giant, violently jerking something that was not the lever.

“You’re jamming it!” incorrectly screamed Johnnie, eager to feed the gun.

The Kaiser’s biplanes strafed their own heavy machine gun fire across a pockmarked road, as the driver sped the vehicle, as the long line of infantrymen marching on both sides of the road threw themselves into the adjacent muddy field.

* * *

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

“How far is 55 KM again?” asked Johnnie, holding a ruler on the clear map sprawled across the reconnaissance table, as the Davidson-Cadillac armored vehicle lurched ahead, alongside the never-ending line of infantry.

“Multiple by one-point-six,” replied Giant, his eyes peering through the slit in front of the heavy machine gun.

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

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

“We’re far away from the Western Front,” said the junior LT airman, to no one in particular. “How can German planes be so bold?”

“Pilots fly where wings take ’em,” said Major Carl van der Bix, looking at his notepad to compare the clear map with various military units provided by Billy Mitchell. “Clermont-Ferrand... The 79th Aero squadron... A construction squadron... The 7th Aviation Instruction Center.”

“Too bad the construction unit ain’t just building the Panama Canal again,” said Teddy’s grunt, trumping Carl. “So how did you get *suckered*, Major?”

“It was my way out,” said Carl.

* * *

“You’re crazy, VeeBee,” said Earl Daugherty, driving his brand-new 1910 Ford Model T motor vehicle across San Pedro’s undeveloped Pacific Avenue, as schooners docked at the Port of Los Angeles delivered timber from the Pacific northwest used to construct California’s housing. “Help me build the aerodrome in Long Beach.”

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

“Uniforms won’t free you from old bastards,” said Earl. “Let’s stick together to make our own dreams come true.”

* * *

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 a reel of motion picture film to assess 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, leaning close to the Sergeant, “and find someone who can fire a machine gun.”

* * *

“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.”

“My LT needs film reels flown immediately to Air Service HQ in Champagne-Ardenne,” said Carl, “and Billy Mitchell ordered me to round up pilots for the southern tip of the Front.”

“Got no aviators available,” said General Bernie Bliss, the aerodrome’s day-to-day XO, as he studied the order, stared at Carl, and handed the typed page to the youngest Major in the Army. “Don’t get your uniform muddy.”

* * *

“Got anything to go?” asked the grim-faced Sergeant, to a tall broad-chested muscular Private First Class serving food from massive pots set on a mule-drawn cart. “I’m driving a Major to the Front.”

“If you’ve got an order,” said the Black soldier, as he saluted officers passing on horseback.

“He’s an NCO, Boy,” said Johnny, neither bigger nor older than the Private First Class.

“Can it, Johnnie,” said the Sergeant.

“How’d a Negro even make PFC?” said Giant, disdainfully outranked by a Black man.

“Show me an order for food,” sternly stated the PFC, holding the ladle tightly.

The Sergeant turned to the 17-year-olds while pointing his index finger to the PFC’s strips.
“Soldiers earn rank by earning rank, Private.”

“I moved heavy weapons as a muleskinner,” said the Black man, relegated by the U.S. Army to serve food. “Took over a potato digger when our Corporal got gunned apart.”

“Bingo,” said the Sergeant.

* * *

“On the road, again,” sang Carl van der Bix, to the Sergeant, motioning to a never-ending line of AEF vehicles and infantry moving in light rain. Carl turned to his junior officer. “Did you obtain a second vehicle?”

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

Carl scowled, and looked to see a Black soldier holding PFC rank helping the two riflemen load the vehicle.

“Why is he climbing in?” asked Carl.

“Found a jack-of-all-trades,” said the driver, “so orders get us a machine-gunner.”

“Good eyes,” said the Major. “Billy Mitchell gave me what I need.”

“When do I finally fly?” asked the 21-year-old, looking upward, into a cloudy gray sky.

“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.”

* * *

“Are you claiming ‘*no restriction on movement*’ as your rationale to steal my best cook?” asked General Bernie Bliss, “or is a Black man on equal status of ‘*honorable conduct*’ in your unit?”

“Both, Sir,” saluted Major Carl van der Bix, who took the General’s hand-scrawled order.

* * *

The Sergeant maintained close distance in the line of AEF vehicles, all struggling to not skid-and-bump or slide off the muddy road.

“Left the Green Mountains when the war started to volunteer as an ambulance driver for the French,” said the PFC, seated next to the driver.

“Planes!” yelled Carl, quickly scanning the window slit to spot five American aircraft popping out from the gray clouds, to protect the AEF column. “Ours...”

“How come *he* gets to sit up front?” asked the small rifleman not studying the map.

“So he can drive if I’m shot,” grumbled the Sergeant, downshifting on the muddy road.

“Stop shoveling shit on this PFC,” said the Major, waiving a pair of orders.

The teenagers and the young LT said nothing.

“May I, Sir?” asked the Private First Class, who quickly read the typed order signed by the AEF Supreme Commander and the scrawled second order from Bernie Bliss.

“Approaching Orange, Sir,” said Johnnie.

“I’ll tour the hospitals as the LT shoots a reel of film,” said Carl, pocketing both orders.

“I’ve driven the wounded here,” said the Private First Class. “There *might* be Doughboys, but probably mostly ANZAC tortured in the trenches after the misery of Gallipoli.”

* * *

The LT hand-cranked the large motion picture camera, showing Carl talking with an elderly Nun wearing a face mask.

“I believe we *do* have two AEF aviators,” said the Nun, leading Major Carl van der Bix away from the camera. At the Nun’s prompting, the Major slipped on a face mask, as he passed the dull eyes of survivors of the Great War, suffering wounds inflicted by weapons never imagined, and victims of the Spanish Flu, on beds set row upon row in a massive ward of the Catholic hospital.

The LT continued filming, as the Major and Nun marched across the ward, and disappeared into an adjacent hallway marked by a sign as, “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 one, resting in bed.

“Our Major wants our wings back,” said the other, sitting in a chair, “and there’s no way you’ve worn 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 away from the Davidson-Cadillac armored vehicle. “Where’s the PFC?”

“Kept ’em inside,” said the driver. “He knew where the fuel is.”

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

“We rounded up meat and cheese,” said Johnnie, lofting sacks into the vehicle.

“And a bottle of wine!” said Giant, receiving the sacks.

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

* * *

“I don’t even have your name,” said Carl, to the PFC, as the driver struggled to move through increasingly muddy roads.

“John Rock, Sir, of Rutland VT, twenty-five,” replied the Private First Class, who watched Carl add the details to a handwritten order, which read, only, “Major Carl van der Bix is authorized to make use of my Private First Class,” and signed by Bernie Bliss. “I’m a cook.”

“And the Kaiser didn’t bomb the food wagons?” asked the Sergeant.

“Drove through cannon fire all the time,” said John Rock, “but the AEF doesn’t care that the French taught me heavy weapons.”

“I got taught in America,” said Private Giant, “cuz Americans are smarter.”

“You’re privileged,” said the ranking PFC. “My only way out of the Green Mountains was volunteering to drive for the French.” The PFC pointed through the window slit, toward an ancient walled city. “There’s a lot of Doughboys in Avignon, Sir.”

* * *

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

The Cardinal lifted his shaking index finger and silently pointed to a young Nun, who, despite her face mask, was obviously beautiful. “Go,” instructed the old man, and the Major followed the Nun to find American airmen recovering from the Great War.

The LT finished filming and wrote the proper spelling of names given by the Cardinal, while repeatedly glancing upward to watch the Nun lead the Major into the Palace.

Inside, other masked Nuns joined masked doctors and nurses to serve hundreds of maskless AEF Doughboys in a vast hospital ward for survivors of the “War to End All Wars.”

“Please...,” said the stunningly-beautiful Nun, pointing to her own mask while handing another to the Major, to protect from the global pandemic that had seen a down-tick in cases over the summer of 1918, but which would within two years slay 100 million people worldwide to become the most brutal killer ever to strike the Industrial Age.

The Major donned the mask and followed the stunning Nun into “Advanced Recovery,” stopping at the doorway, as hospital staff cleared blood-stained sheets from an empty bed.

All eyes lit up inside the crowded room, upon the Nun’s arrival.

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

“Only if she takes off her mask,” said several soldiers, excitedly.

* * *

“Avignon is made for films and beautiful actresses,” said Major Carl van der Bix, watching as his junior officer shot silent footage of him posing briefly with the Nun after exiting the hospital. The Nun blushed, but replaced her face mask before walking away. “Hope you got her name.”

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

“We’re getting four aviators, so you’ll need Rock on the Colt-Browning,” said the Major. “Did you get a driver?”

“No, Sir, but the Division’s XO gave me a corkscrew and a fancy bottle of wine,” said the young pilot, shouldering the large camera. “Why don’t Popes crack the neck like smart people?”

* * *

Carl held the cork and 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 corkscrewed bottle of heavy, warm, strong red wine circulated.

“Crashing is like being punched really hard, but it keeps hurting,” said a red-haired pilot roped by the Major from 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 me,” said a brown-haired patient from advanced recovery, “so at least it stops hurting.”

“Which squadron gets us?” asked the brown-haired pilot, his throat relaxing.

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

“In other words,” said the blond aviator recruited from the hospital, as he took the bottle, “you won’t tell us shit. . . , Sir.”

The bottle kept moving, as light thoughts carried men in their 20s where they wished to be.

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

“Like the Nun who escorted the Major,” asked the red head.

“Sister Grace,” said the LT, not needing to study his notepad, “and she took off her mask so I could shoot her on film.”

“Don’t take advantage of my Angel of the Ladies,” said one of the recovering pilots, while others swooned at finally learning her name.

The four patients, the junior LT and the Major drank and insulted the Kaiser and dangled their legs off the edge of the ancient broken bridge outside of the stone walls of Avignon, as two teenagers, a Black man in his 20s and the grim driver in his 30s sat alongside two armored vehicles at the base of the bridge, sharing meat, bread and cheese, after their bottle got snatched by the blond.

“I thought I died,” said the red-head. “Then came Grace. . . I figured I’d gone to Heaven.”

“By Grace, we didn’t die,” said the blond LT, raising the bottle he had snatched. “Not yet.”

* * *

“Can see the aerodrome in Marseille, Sir,” growled the not-drunk driver, who led the pair of Davidson-Cadillac armed vehicles over muddy roads, after Carl van der Bix and the LTs had emptied the *Chateaufort du Pape* and then finished the cheap second bottle that the blond lieutenant had snatched from PFC John Rock’s hand.

In his drunken eyes, Major Carl van der Bix did not see the distant 9th Aero Squadron base, but instead watched his best friend, Earl Daugherty, land his biplane onto the Long Beach shoreline, in the town nicknamed “Iowa By The Sea,” because thousands of Iowans forming a conservative majority and vied head-to-head with Los Angeles to be the most popular city in southern California.

“Sir?” repeated the Sergeant.

Carl didn't hear the driver, but instead heard Fort Mac's David Arian, who had driven from San Pedro to tell the Old Man that Carl could rise in the ranks quickly, due in part to his talents for flight and mechanics, and also the prominence of the family's real estate business.

“He needs to sober up,” said Giant, manning the machinegun.

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

Carl's drunken eyes didn't see his vehicle sliding off the muddy road, or hear it smack into the second vehicle, driven by the PFC.

Instead, the drunken Staff Officer recalled his stern father offering no congratulations on Carl's commission as a junior 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 to France of the American Expeditionary Force.

“We'll have to dig ourselves out of the mud without him,” muttered the driver.

Chapter Ten – Laughter Is A Privilege

As COVID made the wise wear masks, faceless Fat Cats who dined outside the most expensive restaurant in Long Beach stood politely and applauded two Hollywood stars being led to the private patio table of the former Governor, and joined by Long Beach Mayor Tony Kim, the dork Councilman and his chief deputy.

“Why are we in a crowded patio during a pandemic?” asked Larry van der Bix, his face mask bouncing.

“It’s hard to say ‘no’ when a former Governor demands to buy you lunch,” said Chief of Staff Jeanine Howard, to her boss.

“My *Happy Amigos!*” swooned Arnold Spankergrüber, taking his enormous cigar from his fantastic facemask.

A maître de in an impeccable starched-white uniform escorted That Jon Guy and Tom Producer Man across the massive-but-newly-erected tented patio of The 565 Club, built when roller coasters, tattoo parlors, and sailors of the Pacific Fleet roaming The Pike made Long Beach the second-largest pleasure zone in America. “The menu is *more fantastic* than last night’s ‘Blinker Day’ vote.”

“It was only the First Reading,” corrected the Mayor. “We continue in June.”

“Banks don’t give away chocolate,” meekly smiled Tom Pranks, offering a box of candy to the Councilman who had won the \$313 million Mega-Million on May 26th. “But my *fucking* Two Dollar Bill costed money.”

“Candy!” gleamed Arnold Spankergrüber, reaching for the box of chocolate. “Fantastic!”

The maître de signaled masked staff to offer chairs to the Hollywood stars waiting to take their seats at the table.

Jon Stuart – the bearded man with long salt-and-pepper hair – smiled to Larry, extended his hand, but playfully-and-demonstratively yanked it back. “Oops, COVID!”

Both comedians immediately-but-casually sat and flipped open menus.

“Oh!” said a waiter, after sliding a chair for the man who brought a box of candy. “It’s Forest Blimp!”

Mayor Tony Kim, Larry and Jeanine watched Arnold and Jon chuckle.

“Wow!” said the waiter, to a colleague in starched whites, as they walked off.
“Forest Blimp....”

“*Gump*,” said the meek actor, angrily removing his face mask.

“Hmmm, seafood appetizers,” said That Jon Guy, carefully studying the menu.

“*My Happy Chappies* will be *so snappy* over the *fantastic* food!” cooed Arnold, stealing from Hollywood to demand the politicians to pick up the menu. “Enjoy the privilege to eat, drink, and get rich... on me!”

“He’s already *fucking* richer than all of us,” shot back Tom.

Mayor Tony Kim turned to Councilman Larry van der Bix, as Chief of Staff Jeanine Howard pulled out a pad and pen.

* * *

“Show the *fucking* clown the *fucking* picture of me buying the *fucking* ticket, Jon,” demanded Tom, scowling as Arnold angrily swung his fork toward Larry.

“Ah!” screamed the dork, as hot calamari smacked his now-exposed cheek.

Jeanine Howard continued writing notes.

The bearded, long-haired salt-and-pepper blond lifted his smart phone to show an image of the *Three Caballeros*, posing at the cash register of a 7-Eleven where they had bought Larry’s gift lottery ticket.

In the image, Tom demonstrably held paper money depicting a slave owner. Arnold held a large red pen. Jon bumped elbows with an Indian who owned the store. Behind them, a screen showed \$313 million as the prize for the May 26th Mega-Millions.

“Who bought the *fucking* Two Dollar Bill?” spat Tom.

“I hate COVID,” spat Arnold. “We could make a *fantastic* major motion picture.”

“Larry, Larry, Larry,” said Jon, pocketing his phone and disregarding the spats.

“We want you to run for President as the star of a reality TV star with zero competition.”

“A small team with everyone far apart outside can shoot,” added Tom.

“A call on our secure line for Mr. Hanks,” said the maître de, wheeling a chart with an antique green dial phone.

Jon and Arnold chuckled.

“Pranks! Why don’t people get my name right?” shot back the blond actor, lifting the phone. “I can’t believe the clown is rich because of *my* Two Dollar Bill.”

“It was *my* pen!” howled the enormous weightlifter.

Jon corrected Tom. “That’s *Mister* Clown.”

“Mister Clown, please use the secure line,” said the maître de.

“Who the *fuck* is this?” demanded Tom, taking the call.

Larry and Jeanine looked to the Mayor, tapping his watch.

“The White House?” replied Tom, dropping his fork and standing to attention.

Jeanine Howard returned to writing notes.

* * *

“Lar-RY!” chanted a table of socially-distant lawyers, who led a masked wave.

“You’re making it up that the President called,” said Larry, while Tom, Arnold and Jon dug into magnificent main servings.

“We want to make an offer you can’t refuse,” said Tom Pranks.

“Maryann verified the White House asked where we were,” said Jeanine, showing Larry a text message.

“The President will be flying to Long Beach tomorrow to meet... him?” asked Mayor Tony Kim. “We will need to close the 405 and provide security.”

“Sometimes a Mayor or Governor isn’t enough to make Americans laugh again,” said Jon, waving his fork.

Jeanine continued taking notes.

“Mr. Bully Hate Man will try to rope in the Cowboy’s money,” hissed Arnold, sifting through the box of chocolate. “Just like us.”

“We’re pitching our *fuckin*g show to make fun of the president,” said Tom Pranks, “not to let him steal our cameras.”

Councilman Larry van der Bix looked at the notes taken by his Chief of Staff.

“Help us make America laugh again,” said Jon Stuart. “Humor can defeat hate.”

Jeanine Howard kept writing notes.

“History happens in unexpected ways,” said Jon, nodding to a dork with a gift hat of privilege beside him. “Help us change the debate, one laugh at a time.”

Mayor Tony Kim turned to Larry and Jeanine, motioning to his wristwatch.

Another pair of waiters swiftly closed in, with one cleaning flecks of steak near Tom’s plate, while the other collected salmon beside Arnold’s wine glass.

“You’re *right*,” said one waiter to the other. “It’s *Captain Ryan!*”

“*Private!*” snapped Tom Pranks, scowling.

“Ha, funny, fantastic,” laughed Arnold, as the waiters left after clearing flecks.

“Everyone knows *my* name!”

“At least they buy their own *fucking* pens!” shot back Tom.

“The pen came with the free hat,” replied Arnold, defending his acts of privilege.

“I buy a *fantastic* amount of Stetson boots.”

“Larry, it doesn’t matter what others do,” said Jon Stuart, disregarding more spats.

“It only matters what you do.”

“Ride ’em, Cowboy!” exclaimed guests at the other side of the patio.

“We can do the horsey thing,” demanded Arnold, “and *ride* for President!”

“Oh, that’s good,” said Tom. “Do horses get COVID?”

Restaurant customers abandoned any attempt at discretion, chanting masklessly to cheer their elected mega-tycoon.

The dork immediately put his mask back on, as though to hide.

“If you take Mr. Bix on extended leave,” said Mayor Tony Kim, “I cannot save him from a recall.”

“I need good priorities,” said Larry, looking to Jeanine, who silently nodded.

“Larry, Larry, Larry,” said Jon, staying focused on the dork, as a TV star would do interviewing elected officials during a decade hosting a nighttime national comedy show.

“Let’s take this one trot at a time.”

“The decision is the Councilman’s,” continued the Mayor. “It is his privilege.”

“I’m *not* running for President!” exclaimed Councilman Larry van der Bix.

The city’s most expensive restaurant went silent.

“I’m so tired of hearing, ‘*Not running,*’” squawked Arnold, chocolate dripping from his lips.

Jeanine drew a large star next to Larry’s statement she had written on the pad.

* * *

“That went well,” said Councilman Larry van der Bix, as he ran behind his furious Chief of Staff, to navigate the chaos of homeless people camped in Lincoln Park.

“Don’t touch me!” screamed a pungent, unkempt masked homeless woman, after Larry bumped into her at the base of the monument constructed in 1912 to honor America’s second “great” president.

“The Mayor is furious!” spat Jeanine Howard. “You said when he left the restaurant that you *won’t* run.”

“Look!” said another homeless woman. “It’s the Cowboy!”

“Mr. Mega Millions!” gasped a man in a wheelchair.

“Spare a Two, Mister!” chanted the vagabonds, arms extended.

Jeanine kept marching to City Hall, as a swarm of homeless swooped the dork.

“No!” said Larry, after bolting from only the second statue honoring Lincoln.

“And then, *outside*, you tell Arnold, ‘*Maybe*,’” yelled Jeanine, outpacing her boss, charging ahead, as Larry broke from the zombie-like swarm begging for two dollar bills. “And we’re supposed to wait for *Air Force One* tomorrow!”

“Wait!” begged Larry.

“It’s a couple days to June and it’s already gloomy,” said Jeanine, making no effort to slow her pace. “Do people only say it, or are you actually insane?”

Larry scrambled to outrun screaming vagabonds.

“Buy some weed, Cowboy?” offered a reefer smoker. “It’d be an OG privilege.”

PART TWO – THE CHAOS OF BATTLE

Chapter Eleven – Eight Minutes And Forty Six Seconds

Billie McGee sat motionless in the passenger’s side, his eyes locked on a YouTube video, as the U-Haul passed the 6th Street exit into Amarillo Texas

“Watching yourself crack jokes again?” asked Karen, pointing to a missed off ramp.
“We can do some freelance shoots at Cadillac Ranch and Palo Duro Canyon State Park.”

“Maybe we can go hiking,” said Riley Beach, enthusiastically.

“We’re not stopping,” said Lori, clutching the steering wheel.

“We’re not at war!” fired December, sternly.

“That doesn’t look like a video game,” said the nine-year-old, peered at Billie’s phone and lifting the pair of earphones the cameraman wasn’t wearing.

“Is that the President joke you recorded on our patio?” asked December, shaking a wife’s anger at her husband.

Billie stayed quiet.

“Why can’t he breathe?” asked Riley, taking the earphones out.

December immediately glanced downward and saw a Black man forced onto the ground by a police officer’s knee jammed on his neck. “What’s *that*?”

“Police killing a guy in Minneapolis,” quietly replied Billie McGee.

“Oh please don’t show something like *that*,” quickly pled December, wrapping a mother’s arm to pull Riley’s eyes away from viewing of 8-minutes-and-46-second that altered the world.

“I’m sorry,” said Billie. “It’s just... hard to *not* see.”

Karen Joplin looked down, exhaled disdainfully, before again looking up to the Texas road.
“You’re wasting everybody’s time.”

“It’s so obvious,” said Billie, again quietly apologizing to no one in particular.

“You told me the President joke is going viral,” said Karen, “so put *that* on.”

Billie looked to the woman paying his wage, at the concerned mother clutching her child, and at the driver unhappy to be leaving home. Billie silently surrendered, and pocketed his phone.

“You don’t have to tell jokes,” said December, as Riley wriggled free of her grip.

“Barf bag?” said Billie McGee, with no timing or playful voice. “No, I voted for Bernie.”
After a delay, Billie added, “Book bag?” and delivered the punch line. “No, charges got dropped.”

* * *

“C’mon, the Major’s drunk,” grumbled the grim-faced driver of the Davidson-Cadillac reconnaissance vehicle now stuck in the mud due to September rains over France.

“Sergeant, we can’t leave the Major,” gasped Johnnie, the small rifleman who had left high school with his friend, Giant, to become Sons of Liberty, and get sent “Over There,” as Doughboys of the American Expeditionary Forces fighting the “War To End All Wars.”

“I’m not leaving him, either,” said Giant, who crossed his arms and refused to climb off the elevated seat adjacent to the heavy machinegun he had proven unable to fire.

The driver stared for a moment at the pair of 17-year-olds, grunted, swung open the door, and climbed out.

“I don’t think we’re going to *leave* him,” said the junior LT assigned to staff the Major, as he climbed out as well, only to fall face-first into the knee-deep mud that once had been a road.

“Lieutenant?” said the PFC, extending his hand to the junior LT, pulling him from the mud.

“So where’s the Boss?” asked a red-haired pilot climbing out of the second vehicle, which the PFC drove after the Major had rounded up the four airmen in Avignon France to fly during the first major battle of WWI that would be led by the American Expeditionary Forces.

“Who cares?” shot back a tipsy blond LT, struggling to climb out of the second vehicle, perhaps due to drinking heavily several hours earlier by snatching the bottle of cheap wine from John Rock’s hand, when the officers had finished their own bottle of fancy wine on the broken ancient bridge outside the stone walls of Avignon.

“At least pushing this out of the mud will be easier than getting shot down,” said the black-haired pilot recruited inside the Palais des Papes, once home of seven Catholic Popes, but now cherished as the place where the most beautiful woman in France – Sister Grace – tends to Doughboys recovering from trench warfare, gas attacks, cannon fire, aircraft bombings, or simply gasping for breath and coughing blood due to a return of the Spanish Flu, the most brutal killer ever to strike the Industrial Age.

“Looks like we gotta do this alone, Rock,” said the grim-faced driver to the PFC, both grumbling that the Major was too drunk to lead nine men on pushing vehicles out of the mud.

“The rifleman needs to mount the potato digger on solid ground,” observed the PFC.

The Sergeant nodded, and they turned to the junior LT, who saw that two older men with combat experience were waiting for his decision, and he rapidly nodded.

“You’re the NCO, Sergeant,” said the PFC, who struggled to pull each leg from the knee-deep mud, so as to take hold of the Colt-Browning being handed to him by the giant.

* * *

“It would be wrong to leave my job on the Long Beach City Council just to be on your stupid reality TV show,” said Councilman Larry van der Bix, looking quickly to Jeanine Howard for approval from his Chief of Staff, who nodded while taking notes of the 8:45 am call.

“You must join us,” said Arnold Spankergrüber, the weightlifter-turned-movie-star-turned-Governor and who now is working with his two “Happy Chappies” – Jon Stuart and Tom Pranks – to snatch money from the lottery-winning dork to heavily fund a comedy show that would spend the summer and fall of 2020 making fun of the President to hurt his reelection. “We are waiting for Air Force One.”

* * *

“But I don’t *want* to go back to Long Beach,” said December, as she and her husband, Lori, watched their son, Riley, follow the Dynamic Duo from Maine – a middle-aged white woman named Karen and a Black out-of-work comedian known for bag joke – to shot video of a public art installation and sculpture in Amarillo Texas.

“We could fly back,” said Lori. “We can pay Billie to drive our stuff home.”

“I want a *new* future with some actual devotion,” replied December, scanning Cadillac Ranch to watch their son. Her eyes misted when she saw Billie McGee sluggishly drag himself behind the bubbly hippy. “Love’s got to be more than a job or a privilege.”

The couple watched Riley climb one of the ten Cadillacs buried nose-first into the ground, as Karen ordered him to climb off. Billie shot no video, looked at no one, and told no jokes.

“Larry promised to buy anyplace we want in Long Beach, since he won the lottery again,” quickly added Lori, famous for Olympic medals, but a recipient of little money and who otherwise earned a soldier’s pay, as the rare athlete who refused endorsement contracts or modeling for ads.

“I don’t want anyone’s money,” shot back December. “I want a husband who loves me and cares about our kid.”

The couple stopped talking when their son and the Dynamic Duo approached.

* * *

“Johnnie, get your gun!” shouted Giant, the enormous rifleman, to his petite buddy who appeared unwilling to climb out of the Davidson-Cadillac, and instead merely watched Giant and

the Black soldier carry the 35-pound machinegun, its tripod and belts of ammo to solid ground.

“Get your gun!”

“I’m protecting the Major,” said the unarmed Private, as Carl van der Bix snored.

“Then wake ’em up!” shouted the Sergeant, before turning to see the mud-drenched LT carrying the hand-cranked motion picture camera toward a nearby hill. “What’re you doing, Sir?”

“I gotta finish nine minutes before I can put a fresh reel to shoot film of the aerodrome,” shouted the cameraman, setting up a shot of vehicles in the mud with the spectacular Mediterranean reflecting the gray clouds above. “This is the reel with Sister Grace.”

John Rock mounted the Colt-Browning M1895, as Giant laid ammo belts at the ready.

“Ever actually *fired* the potato digger?” asked the PFC, pointing to the air-cooled, belt-fed, gas-operated machine gun with a closed bolt that sends 450 rounds per minute.

“Well, uh, no one else in our class was big enough to carry it,” struggled the 17-year-old, as John Rock’s fingers methodically gave instruction. “Why do they call it that?”

“Ever dug potatoes in Vermont?” replied the PFC.

“Move these vehicles, or the Major’s an open target!” barked the Sergeant, making things obvious but giving no orders, before turning to the rifleman. “Be ready to fire, Private!”

“You can do it, Giant,” chimed the 25-year-old PFC, to encourage the teenaged rifleman. “Throw your lever and listen!”

The four LTs showed little skill, energy or desire to push the second vehicle out of the mud, as the Sergeant and PFC struggled to lift each leg from the knee-deep slog to return to the Major.

The LT cranked the motion picture camera to show four lazy pilots, a trembling rifleman, the giant ready to fire and two combat grunts slogging thru the mud to save their Major.

“Get your gun!” again shouted Giant, as he fed the .30-caliber belt and threw the operating lever under the rear of the gun, below the stock, hinged near the breech.

* * *

Councilman Larry van der Bix stood alongside the Mayor of Long Beach and their staff entourage – plus three *Happy Amigos* – to lead a delegation of elected officials, business and labor leaders, and a carefully-selected crowd, for the instantly-scheduled welcoming ceremony at a red carpet on the tarmac of the municipal airport originally built by Earl Daugherty nearly a century earlier.

“When does the President get here?” asked Larry, as city workers wheeled a aluminum-and-steel stairway to await the arrival of Air Force One.

“You still have not told me *why* we are waiting for the President... with the Governor, and... *comedians*,” whispered Mayor Tony Kim, nodding discretely toward the *Three Caballeros* – Arnold Spankergrüber, Tom Pranks and Jon Stuart.

“Kind’a hard to explain,” said Larry, before turning to his press secretary, Maryann Moore, who studied her smart phone.

“The White House demands that any Black Lives Matter protester be pushed back before the President will authorize Air Force One to land,” said Maryann Moore.

“Another outrageous demand!” said the Mayor, looking past the red carpet to a tented stage, where a surf guitar band and Cambodian dancers and TV news crews – all in face masks – waited in the mist of an early June gloom.

“Outrageous demands make for *fantastic* film,” said the Governor, exercising the privilege of smoking a giant cigar through his *fantastic* face mask, while the sounds of hundreds of protesters – chanting “No Justice! No Peace!” – floated over a thick line of police, and flooded the tarmac with a cacophony of anger.

“Comedy is the catharsis for crimes and misdemeanors,” said Jon Stuart, watching the sky for any sign of Air Force One.

“Should we tamp down the *fucking* George Floyd shit?” said Tom Pranks, meekly smiling and waving to military veterans from Wilmington, waiting in dress uniform and masks to present the American Flag to a Commander-in-Chief who wears neither.

“Maybe it is worth smelling, to remind everyone that shit stinks,” replied Arnold, holding up a piece of chocolate from the gift box. “Think of the ratings... ‘Look! Shit!’”

“A rather obtuse way to compare a police killing with Ronald Reagan’s joke on incurable optimism,” observed Jon Stuart, “since few people these days shovel shit.”

“We can *show* the shit, but let viewers judge for themselves,” said Tom Pranks.

“Ha! Funny! Fantastic!” chuckled Arnold Spankergrüber. “Hollywood can always find spectacular ways to make money on shit.”

* * *

“I thought we weren’t going to hike,” said Riley Beach, as his dad parked the U-Haul and pointed to multicolored layers of rock and steep mesa walls of the Palo Duro Canyon, a canyon system running 120 miles across the Texas Panhandle, for the second-largest canyon in America.

“Bring your large camera to shoot some freelance high-quality video,” ordered Karen, swinging open the passenger door and hopping out.

Billie McGee did not hop out, or reach for a camera, or say anything, or move at all.

“Pardon me, Mr. Billie,” said Riley, maneuvering warmly over the motionless comedian.

“We’ll catch up, Little One,” said December, lovingly waving a rare dose of freedom to the nine-year-old. “You can *bring* your mask. . . .”

The woman in her 50s returned to the U-Haul to lean with privilege in the passenger’s side. “I told you to bring the large camera,” repeated the retired Master Sergeant.

“No. . . , Miss. . . Miss Karen,” said Bobbie. “Sort’a not feeling good, you know. . . .”

“I’m a camera-*man*,” said Riley, proudly holding the portable camera that Billie gave him.

“How convenient,” said Karen, looking with judgement on a couple ready to let their kid walk off and a Black man unwilling to earn his way through life. “At least one man’s not a boy.”

Riley bounced out and followed Karen Joplin, both periodically looking back for assurance that no one would forget them.

“I hope it’s okay if I stay in the truck” said Bobbie McGee.

“We’ll talk outside,” said December, as she and Lori climbed out. “You take care, okay?”

“Thank you,” said Billie, and the two women held hands and walked to follow their son at enough of a distance that a husband and wife could talk freely of marriage, love, and devotion.

* * *

“Planes!” yelled Major Carl van der Bix, bolting upward from his drunken sleep, but instantly holding his head and squinting, to see a petite 17-year-old blocking an open door.

A hundred yards away, shaded by the last trees on a small hill, the junior LT continued cranking the motion picture camera, as the shot captured a pair of the Kaiser’s planes coming off the Mediterranean.

“Major!” said the petite Private, turning his back to the open door. “You’re up!”

“Johnnie, get your gun!” yelled Giant, as he opened fire with his .30-caliber machine gun.

“Down!” yelled the Sergeant, as he and four LTs and the PFC threw themselves deeply into the heavy mud, as the Kaiser’s planes strafed machine gun fire, hitting both vehicles, and cutting pieces from the petite teenager’s back.

The giant rifleman fed his own gun, firing hundreds of rounds against two biplanes flying close range, hitting one plane, and sparking flame as the two planes finished the first run.

On the nearby hillside, the LT cranked the camera, to show Major Carl van der Bix pulling the 17-year-old into the vehicle, and, a moment later, belly flopping into the thick mud, as the German planes returned on a second run, to finish the “Sister Grace reel” with the chaos of battle.

“Johnnie’s dead!” yelled Carl, to the PFC and Sergeant crawling through the mud.

* * *

As rain fell onto the empty 405 Fwy, Long Beach airport workers erected a small tent with folding chairs for the three Hollywood stars chatting with TV crews.

“Tell your *Girly-Man* to shoot video,” ordered the former Governor, motioning for someone to aim at the band and dancers under the dripping tent. “Fantastic footage!”

Justin Rudd – protecting several cameras from the rain – instead took pictures of the *Three Caballeros* relaxing in the privilege of a newly-erected tent, while business and labor leaders stood in the rain and the crowd of community guests thinned.

“My work is elsewhere,” said Mayor Tony Kim, turning from the empty tarmac. “Tell Dengue Fever and the dancers to go home.”

Other local elected officials followed the Mayor’s departure.

“Where is Jeanine?” whispered the Dork-in-Chief, to his press secretary.

“Picking up her daughter,” replied Maryann Moore.

Larry watched Justin Rudd shoot pictures of elected officials running across the tarmac, to waiting vehicles, not far from a police line guarding an impromptu security wall to defend against protesters and counter-protesters chanting “Let Me Breathe!”

* * *

As the U-Haul slogged through the Texas Panhandle, Billie McGee stayed locked on his earplugs, as his smart phone gave updates on protests erupting across America.

“I hope angry mobs don’t invade Maine,” said Karen, pointing to Billie’s phone, but speaking only to the two white women who had won an 11-room house with an essay. “They’d bring diseases and poor lifestyles into New England.”

“And the protesters in Huntington Beach make us safe?” asked December.

“Surf City is a fine place with honorable people,” opined Karen, before ratcheting her tone. “But those angry Black protesters deserve being gassed.”

All three women checked if the comedian still wore his earplugs.

“Is Miss Karen nice?” quietly asked Riley, after the hippy’s harsh judgment.

* * *

“Grab your potato digger, Rock!” barked the Sergeant, before turning to see the weeping giant pull his dead schoolmate from the Davidson-Cadillac vehicle that had slid into the mud an hour earlier. “We gotta march the final distance.”

The PFC climbed into the second vehicle to gather the machinegun and ammunition belts.

“We went to kindergarten!” cried the blubbering giant, clinging to Johnnie’s body, as the German warplane that the rifleman had shot down burned on the field a kilometer away.

“What the fuck do we do, Major?” yelled an LT rounded up earlier in the day from the military hospital in Avignon, but who’d fly in less than a week’s time as part of 1,400 allied planes that would define the battle of Saint-Mihiel, the first major action led by US forces.

“Why did I leave Grace?” moaned the black-haired pilot.

“Grab that machinegun, Giant, if the second pilot flies back for revenge,” ordered the Major, to the 17-year-old who had shown no panic as the unit’s only gunner, who fed his own weapon, and downed one warplane and sent off another, to save a Major and five junior officers.

“I can’t leave Johnnie!” wept the rifleman.

“Lay him on solid ground... the airbase will recover Johnnie and family will get his stuff,” yelled the Sergeant, “but our mission is to move this Major and five pilots a few kilometers more.”

“An AEF column is speeding our way!” shouted the cameraman spotting from the hillside where he had filmed nine minutes of combat footage.

* * *

“Leave me alone!” shouted the dork, as rain fell heavily onto the empty 405.

Justin Rudd held his massive rainbow umbrella over himself and Maryann Moore, as the two watched their boss, Councilman Larry van der Bix, alone, with no umbrella, soaked and cursing.

The carefully-selected community crowd had disappeared and only a few labor and business leaders could find needed social distance inside a small tent otherwise dominated by the Three Caballeros.

Beyond the police line and security wall, a growing mass of protesters chanted, “Black Lives Matter!”

“Our pilot contract only cover one *fucking* hour,” said Tom Pranks, pointing to a camera crew shooting footage of the dork alone in the rain. “Let’s buy stock video.”

“Gray’s a *fantastic* symbol for our show,” said Arnold Spankergrüber, blowing smoke through the protected-yet-functional hole of his *fantastic* face mask.

Jon Stuart opened his arms, like a comedian portraying a religious prophet, and called on Air Force One to land.

“Why don’t we stand under that tent, Boss,” said Justin, pointing to uniformed veterans protecting the Flag, alongside the surf guitar band and Cambodian dancers.

“Jeanine’s almost here,” said Maryann, scanning her smart phone. “Oh, hold on! If protesters don’t get pushed back, Air Force One will get diverted to Torrance, so the President can go directly to a fundraiser at his golf course in Palos Verdes.”

“There she is!” shouted the rain-soaked dork, waving to his Chief of Staff running across the tarmac.

“He’s in a fucking bunker!” yelled Jeanine Howard. “Air Force One never left!”

“Ha! Funny! Fantastic!” shouted Arnold Spankergrüber.

Chapter Twelve – Does Chaos Deliver Success?

“There’s the bastard who stole my best cook!” laugher Bernie Bliss, a gray-haired One Star General of the Army Air Service, at the crowded Staff Officers briefing being held at the Marseille aerodrome, pointing to a mud-drenched Major Carl van der Bix, who took a seat in the back row, between two spotless officers, after hopping from the AEF column that had rescued his squad from nine minutes of chaos and recovered the dead body and possessions of a 17-year-old rifleman cut apart by the Kaiser’s warplanes. “And he didn’t obey me, cuz I ordered him, ‘Don’t get your uniform muddy.’”

“I pity the poor fool who sits next to VeeBee,” laughed General Billy Mitchell, the number-two commander of the fledgling Army Air Service, stealing a joke before tapping a pool cue onto a detailed map sprawled across the billiards table of the Officers Lounge, now filled with dozens of Generals, Colonels and Majors – a crowd of gray-haired or salt-and-pepper white men who had been flown or driven from the bottom half of the Western Front – waiting to take orders for the pending Battle of Saint-Mihiel.

“How can a green force take a salient the Kaiser’s held all four years of the war?” asked Colonel Oliver Spaulding, as he wiped away mud smeared on his arm by his personal aide, when Carl took the empty chair held for him.

“Blackjack’s covered every detail,” replied Billy Mitchell, tapping his pool cue. “After night crews cut the wires and a million shells rain death, we’ve got more than a thousand planes and plenty of tanks to support waves of infantry storming the trenches.”

“Frogs and Brits are gonna learn that green Yank bastards know how to kick ass,” growled Lt. Col. George S. Patton, who protected his spotless uniform and silver pistols from the muddy Major sitting next to him.

* * *

“Sir, I’ve processed the reel!” shouted Carl’s LT, holding a salute to rush past Staff Officers leaving the briefing room to carry orders for the first major battle of the Great War that would be led by the American Expeditionary Forces.

“General, you’ll need to see this,” said Major Carl van der Bix, to Billy Mitchell and Bernie Bliss, who were talking about tanks with Lt. Col. George Patton.

* * *

“Who the Hell is *she*?” gasped Billy Mitchell, as the handful of Staff Officers watched the freshly-processed reel of 8mm film start tick-tick-ticking away.

“It’s right after Sister Grace,” assured the mud-crust-ed LT, operating the projector. “Had to finish this reel to shot a fresh one of the aerodrome.”

“You’re wasting precious time,” barked Oliver Spaulding, as the film showed Major Carl van der Bix standing outside the military hospital in Avignon France, beside a stunningly-beautiful Nun, who blushed and peeled away her face mask for the camera.

“Stick with Grace for awhile,” gasped George Patton, in a leering meow.

The film immediately cut to a pair of Davidson-Cadillac armored vehicles stuck in the mud and gray clouds over the Mediterranean filling the background.

“Three hours ago,” said the LT, as the film displayed a Black PFC training a giant rifleman on use of the Colt-Browning potato digger, while a Sergeant knee-deep in the mud barked to lazy LTs not pushing their vehicle free, and a tiny unarmed Private at the open door of the other vehicle.

“Where are *you*, Major?” demanded Oliver Spaulding.

“Um...,” said the now-sober Staff Officer, “inside, Sir.”

“Explains why your mud smells like wine,” grumbled Patton.

“Freeze that frame!” immediately ordered Billy Mitchell, jumping from his chair as the LT halted the projector. The number-two commander of the Air Service rushed to the tiny spot on the screen showing a pair of aircraft flying off the Mediterranean.

“They’re coming from the deep southeast.” Mitchell vigorously waved Oliver Spaulding to compare the SE direction to the detailed map still sprawled across the billiards table.

* * *

“Fine work, Lieutenant,” said Billy Mitchell, to Carl’s junior LT, before turning to the Army’s youngest Major. “I want this cameraman spotting with a pilot you gathered.”

“Yes, Sir,” saluted Carl, as Billy Mitchell left with Oliver Spaulding.

“How did you let a Negro teach gun use?” hissed Patton, in his spotless uniform and his pair of ornate silver .45 caliber Colt pistols gained while hunting Pancho Villa.

“He’s a jack-of-all-trades,” said the Major, unhaltingly, turning to Bernie Bliss. “Can I keep your PFC as personal staff, General?”

“This is a *segregated* Army,” barked Patton.

“The Major’s not asking you, George,” said the gray-haired One Star General who had flown himself from the Clermont-Ferrand aerodrome. “I’m honoring Blackjack’s order allowing ‘*no restriction on movement*’ and ‘*honorable conduct*’ as rationale.”

* * *

“You’re now based in Marseille,” said Major Carl van der Bix, to the four young aviators who had started their day gazing at a beautiful Nun, before surviving machinegun strafing across a muddy road, and finished with hot food in an Officers Mess and wearing fresh uniforms issued by the quartermasters unit.

“Him, too?” asked the blond LT who snatched wine, pointing to the Major’s junior LT. “He can’t even clean his uniform.”

“My First Lieutenant will fly as your ranking officer under my command to shoot film,” responded Carl van der Bix, pointing to the mud-crust-ed cameraman who had stood in harm’s way with no weapon, to shoot combat footage that helped determine the direction of enemy forces, and spent hours processing the reel and showing it to the Air Service leadership.

* * *

“Are we released, Sir?” asked the grim-faced Sergeant, as Carl entered a tent where his remaining enlisted personnel were using a bucket of water to wash mud from their uniforms.

“Will Johnnie’s family get his stuff?” added the giant who had displayed no panic and had singlehandedly shot down an enemy plane and chased away another.

“I’ll never abandon a Doughboy, Giant,” said Carl, nodding to the 17-year-old, before pulling orders from a thick envelope, and handing the first to the giant rifleman. “I’m keeping all of you.”

“You mean I’m not peeling potatoes?” asked the PFC.

Giant gasped reading his typed order, promoting him to Private First Class and seeking consideration for the Purple Heart or Silver Star, as Carl handed another sheet.

“You’re now Corporal Rock,” said Major Carl van der Bix, to the Black soldier standing in his briefs beside his clean-but-wet uniform draped over the tent’s cloths line and next to new boots issued by the Quartermasters corps. The 25-year-old read the typed order, signed not by a Major, but General Bernie Bliss, and witnessed by Colonel Oliver Spaulding, specifically naming Corporal John Rock, of Rutland VT, to serve at any capacity assigned to him by the youngest Major in the US Army.

“Boots and a promotion don’t spare Johnnie’s family,” swooned John Rock.

“I’ve transferred the four LTs to Marseille,” said the Major, returning an unneeded salute from Corporal Rock. “Tomorrow, we make another drive to admire Sister Grace.”

Reading his own order, the new Staff Sergeant grinned.

Chapter Thirteen – Who Talks About The Fabulous Gill Sisters?

“Who’s got another story?” said Karen Joplin, as the retired Master Sergeant silently tapping Billie to order more video, as the U-Haul dipped down into the Texas Panhandle.

The cameraman stopped watching coverage of BLM protests and switched to video.

“Daddy won five Olympics,” rapidly replied the nine-year-old.

“She won five medals at the Olympics,” corrected December, hugging her son.

“No one *wins* medals,” said the athlete-and-soldier. “You *earn* them.”

“Would you like the people of Maine to know your *fantastic* story?” asked one white woman to another.

“No comment,” said Lori, driving but not growling.

“Life must be sweet if it’s not stacked against you,” sniped Billie.

“I beg your pardon,” shot back Miss Karen, showing no wiggle room to a performer she had hired as a driver and kissed as a convenience. “Do not insult our clients.”

“He didn’t insult me,” said Lori Lewis. “I made practice because Larry van der Bix drove me at 5 o’clock every morning.”

“See?” said Billie, pointing fingers with a word, before chewing on memories.

“See what?” replied the nine-year-old, trying to spot something on the Texas Panhandle.

“How do I *know* that name?” quietly asked Billie, after chewing.

“Your daddy worked hard and was lucky,” said December, “even against a terrible flu.”

“I was just strategic reserve when the London influenza took out the front line,” said Lori, “but the Gill sisters who kept beating me were *not* from some privileged family.”

“Never heard of them,” said Karen, presenting judgment on who is worth remembering.

“The Gills are an Indian family that runs a curry house in Liverpool,” said the Olympian. “You don’t get silver spoons when the customers are longshoreman and factory workers.”

* * *

“Good luck, Baby, and stay away from anyone with that flu,” said December, as Lori held the common-area phone close, to battle the chaos of excited athletes bouncing in close quarters of the hallway outside her spare room at the 2012 Olympic Village.

“You’re the big story on NPR.” After trading kisses on the phone, Lori dodged athletes and coaches – many half her age – before ducking into her room, and bringing up National Public Radio on the laptop bolted to her desk.

“Perhaps not since the great influenza epidemic of 1918 has the flu brought a greater sense of doom to the people of London.... There is not the horrific death toll as after the Great War, but public health officials say as many as a quarter of the people in London are sick with this rare late-summer flu bug. Ask a Brit, though, and they’ll say their agony is that their ‘best girl’ – Rebecca Adlington, one of the world’s greatest freestyle swimmers – is so hobbled by influenza that Team GB’s doctors won’t allow her to compete in these London games. Down a dozen athletes to the flu so far, Brits did gain a pair of reason to cheer. Moving Baljinder Gill up to Addington’s number one freestyle slot has meant that Gill’s baby sister, Jazz – who tells everyone she’d rather be swimming the Mersey with her best blokes – also earned the chance to compete for Jolly Old England. And a jolly time it’s been for those Gill sisters, who are spinning water into Gold and Silver. Only Lori Lewis, of Long Beach CA – an army sergeant in her 30s making her own improbable Olympic appearance – has proven able to keep up with those fabulous Gill sisters.”

“Lewis!” yelled a coach, “stop wasting time and get moving!”

* * *

“How do you win a medal?” asked Riley Beach, to a father who has spent no time teaching him anything about sports, as either a competitor or fan, or even to ride a bike or play catch.

“By earning them” said the soldier-and-athlete.

* * *

“With Adlington sidelined and the Gill Sisters trading lives of open-water river swims to compete in their first Olympiad, it has been only 36-year-old Lori Lewis who gave England a swim for the Gold. Absent on the winners platform in women’s freestyle swimming are the American teenagers and 20-somethings who sparkled in Omaha, and instead this army sergeant astounded everyone by showing that age really must be just a number. Lewis originally was on the American team only to swim in the grueling 800 meter freestyle and the 10K open water event, but when so many athletes got knocked out by this London flu, Lewis picked up slots in four freestyle events and the four-by-one-hundred. England learned that even a green Yank knows the meaning of greatness. Lewis immediately took Silver in both the 50 and 100, chasing Bella Gill, who scored Gold in each, and her baby sister, Jazz, who took Bronze.”

* * *

“Why don’t you ever tell him about your medals?” ask December, after her husband again cut off discussion on one of the most important stories she could share with their son.

“It’s just the past,” said Lori, who also stays silent on her Presidential Unit Citation for saving lives in Afghanistan. “I prefer the future, where I’ll spend the rest of my life.”

“For someone who keeps looking back at what you didn’t like, you might want to devote yourself a little more on finding a future you want,” said December, in a tender voice meant to be gentle to a child’s ears, but with stern words any wife would give to a husband wearing blinders.

* * *

“T-h-i-s... is London, but unless your name is Gill or you served as a sergeant in the US army, London has been anything but jolly for the world’s best freestyle swimmers. Indeed, the only way to stop the London Olympiad from being dominated by phenoms Bella and Jazz Gill would involve face masks or curry, or that Yankee in her thirties, who swam through the packs – and through her own pain – to keep up with those fabulous Gill Sisters.”

* * *

“If the Gill sisters were working class, how did they represent England?” asked Billie.

“Just because a country is rich doesn’t mean that only the rich go to school or earn medals,” fired back Karen Joplin, the hippy who had hired a good-looking man half her age as a driver.

“I don’t mean to offend anyone,” said Billie. “It’s just... privilege is obviously stacked.”

“You didn’t offend me,” said Lori, interrupting a growing spat between the Dynamic Duo. “The Gill sisters were a fluke who beat their friends in the river Mersey, got bored after London, and never competed again.”

“Like my husband,” sniped December.

“Look at the Blacks in professional sports,” observed Karen, in words she treated as insight. “The successful ones overcome poor lifestyle choices to earn millions.”

“That’s a flat way of seeing the world,” said the out-of-work comedian.

“You are going too far,” growled the hippy, quickly turning to the successful swimmer. “Obviously you made good choices.”

“I almost skipped London, but when I re-upped, the Army asked me to compete,” said Lori, with little excitement. “The Army likes showing familiar faces to recruits.”

“Isn’t that just a form of advertising?” asked Billie.

“Didn’t bother me,” said the Sergeant. “I’m Army all the way.”

* * *

“Before that one American could reach those fabulous Gill sisters, she had her own steep climb. Sure, she may have been one of ‘Pat’s Champs,’ and a record-setter at Woodrow Wilson high school, but that was literally decades ago. Lori Lewis caught her big break on the road to London when finalists from regional trials failed a drug sweep. Lewis, a

sergeant in the mechanized infantry, advanced to the nationals, but her fidelity to her beloved Army nearly cost her the trip to London.”

* * *

“Why’d you stop competing and skip endorsements and advertising,” said Billie McGee.

“Between the Army and family, I had my hands full,” said Lori.

“Well, that’s a very nice set of choices,” opined Karen, who looked with disdain on the comedian who split time between comedy clubs and staying with his mom on the family farm.

“Can I be in the Army?” asked Riley Beach, to a father who lets him read war comics.

“Ask you mother,” said Lori, whose family volunteered for every war since the Revolution.

“Can I, Mommy?” asked Riley, immediately.

“That’s a big question, Little One,” said December slowly. “Let’s talk when you’re older.”

“How much older?” asked the nine-year-old.

“Like, ‘very much’ older,” said the concerned mother.

“Me and Bear lost our Cub because we kept telling her what she *couldn’t* do,” said Karen, methodically resting her index finger on the Chicago baseball patch.

“Please do not make parenting harder,” replied December.

“That’s what Bear always cried over,” said the hippy.

Bobbie McGee, again reviewing coverage of BLM protests spreading across America, stayed quiet, locked to his screen and earphone.

* * *

“The English are cheering the Gill sisters, a pair who entered competitive swimming just two years ago, and show an odd dislike for all that goes with the life of competition. Jazz Gill smiled when she was stripped of her medal in the 800 meters, when officials sanctioned her for openly pushing Lewis to what became a medal-winning performance, despite her obvious agony from pain during that race. While her name is stripped from the records, Jazz Gill’s own performance in that match-up with Lori Lewis is now the stuff of legends.”

* * *

“So you don’t want to talk about London?” asked Karen.

“I don’t spend my time brushing away dust,” said Lori, whose life at home is etched with a marriage of broken stone.

“You don’t plant flower, either,” replied an unhappy wife.

* * *

“The Gill sisters are one and two going into the final in the 800s, Lewis’ best event. Early on, the American showed she is in obvious agony in the water. But instead of leaving the Californian behind, the Gills turned swimming’s most grueling race into a game of follow-the-leader, with Baljinder Gill leading and Jazz Gill goading Lori Lewis along, with a pack far behind. In the end, medals got stripped by gray-haired judges, leaving Lewis standing alone on the winners’ platform.”

* * *

“It’s very sad that you never won the Gold,” said Karen.

“I refused to accept any medal I didn’t earn,” said Lori.

“You’re the only white person I’ve ever met who wouldn’t take a free pass in life,” said Billie McGee.

“Outrageous!” exploded Karen Joplin. “If you don’t tie your lips, you’ll be finishing this trip on a Greyhound to your mother’s farm in Vermont.”

“You obviously never heard my friend talk about Carl van der Bix,” said Lori, nostalgically, to no one in particular.

“How do I *know* that name?” repeated the comedian.

Chapter Fourteen – When Doughboys Disagree on Dishonor

“Don’t fight this battle, Major,” said Corporal John Rock. “No matter your rank, you can’t beat a stacked deck.”

“General Pershing has my back, Corporal Rock,” ordered Major Carl van der Bix, hoping from the one usable Davidson-Cadillac vehicle recovered after the strafing, to face a pair of AEF guards refusing to allow the Major to pass through the roadblock leading into Avignon.

“Major, you’re breaking the rules,” said a Corporal of the Military Police.

“Perhaps you might wish to tell that to John Pershing,” said the youngest Major in the United States Army, holding 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.”

“As though I’m supposed to believe that,” laughed the Corporal.

“You are talking with a Staff Officer,” barked Carl.

“And you’re talking to a cop with a gun,” laughed the MP. “This is a segregated Army.”

Carl produced a second order, also typed, which read. . . .

“American Expeditionary Forces | France | General Order | From Gen Bernie Bliss || I authorize Major Carl van der Bix to make use a soldier under my command – Corporal John Rock, of Rutland VT – as a driver, gunner or other support role.”

“Obviously this is fake,” said the MP, tearing it to pieces.

“You son of a bitch,” yelled Major Carl van der Bix, throwing a fist against the MP’s jar.

“You’re about to be court-martialed.”

“Go ahead,” said the MP, drawing his sidearm. “Send me home early.”

“Why waist time?” said the Major, ready to throw another. “I’ll have you shot.”

“And if you drive this Negro around, be careful of friendly fire,” hissed the MP, wiping blood from his jaw. “Why don’t we chat with my Captain about your dishonorable conduct.”

* * *

“Don’t worry, Corporal,” said the Major, handing scraps of the torn order to the John Rock, as the vehicle navigated the roadblock with a Captain waving them through. “Bernie Bliss will take this all the way up the ladder.”

“The MP isn’t alone, Major,” said Corporal John Rock, who started the Great War in 1914, as a driver and machine-gunner for a French army that drew no lines. “You have a good spirit, Sir, but 300 years in conflict is bigger than a fistfight can solve.”

“Maybe we need the Corporal as the lead gunner on the potato dumper,” said the rifleman, now a Private First Class after feeding his own weapon in nine minutes of open combat.

“You earned PFC as my gunner, Giant,” said the Major, to a 17-year-old who successfully took down an enemy fighter plane and sent off another.

“Digger,” said the Corporal.

“I didn’t call you that, Rock,” said Giant. “I will *never* call you that.”

The grim-faced driver looked in the mirror, and laughed.

* * *

“May I join you, gentleman?” said the Major, inside the Advanced Recovery ward, to see a dozen AEF pilots, but not being escorted by the most beautiful woman in France.

“Why didn’t you bring Sister Grace?” asked a patient.

“She’s on self-quarantine,” said the Major.

Survivor of the “War To End All Wars” gasped.

“Now we *have* to go, before all hope is lost,” said a combat pilot.

* * *

“Apparently, Grace is down with the Spanish Flu,” said the grim new First LT, balancing the motion picture camera on his shoulder. “Guys kept taking off her mask.”

“News travels,” said the Major, exiting the military hospital. “When we deliver six pilots to Marseille, you’ll be flying me to Clermont-Ferrand.”

“Yes, Sir!” said the First LT, excitedly saluting.

* * *

“What’re you doing here, Major?” yelled General Bernie Bliss, the gray-haired XO of the Clermont-Ferrand aerodrome, angrily charging across the HQ conference room, as Carl pulled scraps of paper from his pocket. “We need pilots ASAP!”

“I’m asking for the court marshal of an MP in Avignon,” said Major Carl van der Bix, handing a torn order to the General who had issued it.

“Instead of gathering pilots in the final days before a major battle, you disregarded orders... threw a punch... and flew across France... *for this?*” barked Bernie Bliss.

“If Corporal Rock hadn’t trained my gunner, I’d be dead, Sir,” said Carl.

“And biplanes fly, but when my pilots fly you back, they’ll bring my best cook back,” said Bernie Bliss, refusing the scraps. “If you didn’t know, Major, news travels, and I refuse to lose a Staff Officer for throwing punches.”

“And I refuse to stand down, Sir,” said the Major.

“In a matter of days, more than a thousand planes will be in the air, so stick to your job,” said the General, yelling for Military Police. “My cook will play an important role when two waves of infantry march.”

A pair of MPs rushed into the conference room.

“Get two pilots to escort this punk to Marseille and to bring back Corporal John Rock,” ordered the General, to the saluting MPs, before turning to Carl. “If you rank dishonorable conduct over gathering pilots, I’ll ask Billy Mitchell to demote you to Private.”

FIRST EDITION – COMPLETE NOVEL BY SUMMER 2021...

“Now this is not ‘the end.’ It is not even the ‘beginning of the end.’ But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” – Winston Churchill

Thanks For Reading This Smashwords Edition

- This book tells two love stories set during the global pandemics – the 1918 Spanish Flu and today’s COVID-19 – and is woven with a comedy about white privilege. Even during pandemics and wars, people fall in love and tell jokes, but Hollywood’s big money shows that privilege helps decide get to make people laugh. It’s easy to say “Ha! Funny! Fantastic!” when you’re Arnold Spankergrüber.
- In Part One – “Two Pandemics Two Wars – you meet all the characters and learn the complex history that links them.
- In Part Two – “The Chaos of Battle” – the novel speeds into an explosive opening chapter that weaves the three stories together, and is followed with chapters devoted to each story.
- Woven throughout is the message that George Floyd’s killing may not be the first, nor last, to show the chaos of battle, but that his slaying cuts a clear line between unchallenged privilege and the need to defeat hatred and domination.
- The characters of Corporal John Rock and Billie McGee raise the valid question, of whether a white author – no matter the honorable mission – is able to present Black characters. Only following harsh-but-accurate examination by a trusted critic could the author save himself and rescue readers from the utterly terrible work of the initial text. Hopefully, the two characters are presented honorably.

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