

Civil War

by Eustace F. Pendleby

Carter McMahon kisses Carol, his wife, goodnight and then turns over and turns off his bedside lamp, and they both fall asleep. Carter dreams of birds flying. He is a bird, flying, in his dreams. He sees a bright sun rising over mountains, and there is hunger in his belly. This hunger is fire, burning to the tips of his tail feathers and then to his beak, and Carter turns into ash. He feels weightless and, at first, sees nothing, and he hears only a distant buzzing, which Carter then sees, in his dreams, as being produced by a motorboat on a lake of pristine aquamarine water.

Carter wakes at five fifteen, roused by his strange dreams and a nagging bladder. Carter goes into the bedroom's adjoining bathroom, and he urinates and washes his hands. He takes a tin box out of a cupboard above the toilet. He puts down the commode's lid, sits on the lid, and takes out from the tin his tobacco pouch and cigarette papers and matchbox. He quickly rolls a cigarette and lights it with a match.

Carter drags on his smoke a few times before standing and opening the bathroom's window on the wall next to the toilet. The November air is cool on his face, and this wakes him further. He breathes deeply and puffs on the cigarette more. "The backyard looks wonderful," he thinks, "even just with the floodlights. The landscaping we did over the summer looks great." He grins contently.

Carter lifts the toilet lid. He throws his cigarette in the toilet basin, and this causes a short hiss. He sits on the toilet seat and he shits. Later on, after Carter has showered, and after he has shaved his aging fifty-three-year-old face, and after he has put on pajama pants, an old sweatshirt, and slippers, and after he has started a pot of coffee, and after he has fed the cats, and after he has taken his cholesterol medication, and after he has mixed some pancake batter, and after he has turned on the stove's griddle, he sees the time on the stove's digital clock — 6:21. While the griddle is heating up, Carter decides to walk outside and see if the morning's paper has arrived.

When he walks outside, he notices an M1A2 Abrams U.S. Army tank on the street, right in front of his house.

"Well, I'll be," says Carter. He sees that the tank in front of him is one of ten on his street. Innumerable military helicopters litter the cloudy gray sky, and a male United States Army soldier steps up to Carter and puts an M16 rifle in Carter's face.

"Sir, I have to ask you to please step back into your domicile," says the army man. He has a serious look on his young face.

Carter says nothing and turns and walks back inside his house. Carter begins making the pancakes, which he slices some banana into. He pours a glass of orange juice and speedily drinks the juice. His wife comes down the steps and walks into the kitchen. She kisses Carter's cheek, and he kisses hers back.

“Mornin’,” she tells him.

“Mornin’.”

“Up early, huh?”

“Mm. Dreams.”

“Mm.”

Carol tends the pancakes, and Carter walks into the living room and has a seat on the sofa, holding his empty glass. Then Carter gets up and does something he hasn’t done in a long time: He turns on the radio on their living room’s surround sound system. He adjusts the volume to where only he can hear, and he tunes until he hears this:

“Martial law, folks. You heard it here first. But first, here’s traffic. Tom?”

And then Tom gives an uneventful traffic report.

“Back to you, Sid,” says Tom.

“Thanks, Tom,” says Sid. “Now to our top story: martial law in the United States. Last night, our troops were attacked in the Middle East in what appears to be the beginnings of a substantial region-wide offensive. American and allied forces have suffered extremely heavy casualties. Early numbers are already indicating that as many as nine thousand American and allied servicemen and women could be dead. Allegedly, tactical nuclear weapons were deployed against U.S. military bases throughout the Middle East. At two o’clock this morning, President Biden issued an emergency martial law mandate in fear that al-Qaeda cells within America’s borders would spring to action and threaten all of our freedoms.”

Carter turns off the radio. He walks back to the kitchen, and Carol has a plate of buttered pancakes and a cup of coffee on the table, waiting for him. He walks to his wife

at the sink as she's cleaning dishes, and he puts his hand on her shoulder.

"Sweetheart, come with me," Carter says and takes his wife's hand.

"Hmm?" she hums.

Carter walks them to their unlit dining room and up to the room's long wall where curtains totally cover the large windows that view the front yard. Carter pulls a cord and the curtains fly open. Morning's dim light floods the room, and Carol sees the tanks and the soldiers and the supply trucks and the helicopters and the mess tents.

"Holy fucking shit, Carter," she says.

"Holy fucking shit, Carol."

They both walk back to the kitchen without saying a word more. Carter sits at the table and eats his pancakes and drinks his coffee. Carol toasts a bagel, spreads cream-cheese spread on it, sits at the table, and takes a bite of the bagel.

Carol bursts into tears after swallowing the bite. She wails, and she bangs her fists on her legs.

"No, no, no!" she shouts. "They can't do this. It's not fair!"

"There there, baby," Carter says, scooting nearer his wife and placing his hand on her leg. "There there. Everything's gonna be just fine."

"But why?" she asks, crying out. "Why us? What did we ever do? And on a Saturday!"

"There there, my sugar plum. Everything's gonna be all right. Just let your sweetie pie take care of all of this — right after another cup of coffee." Carter gets up from the table, pours himself another cup, and sits back down at the table. He sips the coffee slowly.

Carol is sniffing, staring off into space, occasionally wiping her nose with her

pink bathrobe's sleeve. They hear gunshots and explosions while sitting at the table. They hear the yells of troops in combat, and they hear the roar of loud engines.

"Sounds like the neighbors have already started," Carter notes after a few minutes. His wife looks at him. "I should get a move on."

Carter finishes the rest of his coffee in a gulp, and he gets up from the table and walks upstairs. His wife starts clearing the table.

In their bedroom, Carter changes out of his pajamas and into a long-sleeved button-up flannel shirt, underwear, blue jeans, and tennis shoes. He looks at himself in the full-length swivel mirror, putting on a belt and straightening his clothes. Carter is hale and attractive. He has most of his wavy brown hair, kept somewhat short and trim, a strong jaw, piercing gray-blue eyes, and a bushy mustache. He kneels beside the bed and pulls out from under the bed a long plastic storage bin, and he takes off the bin's lid. He quietly says the Lord's Prayer to himself as he unloads onto the floor next to the bed all of the box's contents, which comprise an M4A1 assault rifle with attached infrared illuminator, two M1911A1 pistols, boxes of ammunition, flares, a compact medical kit, four hand grenades, a gas mask, a camouflage balaclava, night vision goggles, and a Kevlar vest.

Carter secures the guns and equipment to his person and walks back downstairs. His wife meets him at the doorway to the stairs that lead down to their garage, and she hands him a stainless-steel travel mug filled with hot coffee.

"Carter, I want you to be careful," she tells him. "Don't get yourself killed out there. Okay?"

"I'm not the one who has to worry about getting killed," he says, and his wife, with tears in her eyes, kisses his cheek, which is covered by the balaclava.

Carter walks down the stairs and unlocks his SUV with a button push on his keyless entry remote on his keychain, and he gets in and puts his M4A1 on the passenger seat and his travel mug in the center console cup holder. He starts the silver 2004 GMC Yukon.

“Thank God I had this baby outfitted,” Carter says to himself.

He is speaking of his vehicle’s recent modifications. Carter’s friends from his Marine days know some people who know some people. The modifications include puncture-proof tires, a fully bulletproof and bombproof exterior, missile launchers, Vulcan machineguns, flamethrowers, a cloaking device, and many other features — all of which, when undeployed, are highly covert and invisible to the untrained eye. Carter’s Yukon looks just like a normal Yukon. He had washed and waxed the vehicle only yesterday, and now the morning sunlight makes it shine and sparkle as he drives it to their driveway’s end at the street.

The tanks are still there, though fewer of them, and there are soldiers running around everywhere. Some soldiers are across the street, in the yard of Carter’s neighbors, and they are taking cover behind the neighbors’ house and trees. Carter watches from his driver’s seat as one soldier chucks a grenade into some other neighbors’ yard. The soldier ducks behind a big rock. The grenade explodes, and Carter’s eyes are drawn to an Apache helicopter in the sky that fires a rocket into a house a few streets to Carter’s north. The exploding rocket sends a cloud of smoke into the air.

“I love this country with all of my heart,” Carter says to himself. “But I hate when my comfort is impeded. These assholes never should have fucked with Carter McMahan.”

Carter presses a button on his seat’s side, near the power seat adjuster. His radio

and CD player retract into his console, and a board of buttons and switches slides down into the recess. An HUD appears on Carter's windshield. On the HUD are readouts of his available ammunition, as well as clouds of red dots surrounding larger blue dots. The dots overlay a detailed topographic map of the vicinity.

"Computer," Carter says aloud, "plot a course to 819 Glenview Court, Clear Water subdivision. Activate extreme hostility mode."

"Affirmative, Carter," responds his computer's voice, which is a young woman's, husky and sexy. "How is your morning so far, Carter?"

"I've seen better, computer. I've seen better."

"A back rub for you, sir?" asks the computer.

"Ask me again in an hour."

The Yukon begins to move on its own, out into the street, and two soldiers approach the vehicle from its front with their M16s aimed. One soldier stands in the Yukon's path and holds up his hand to Carter.

"Halt, computer," commands Carter. The Yukon stops.

The other soldier walks around to the SUV's driver's-side front door and taps his fist on the Yukon's tinted window. The soldier yells something at Carter through the window, but Carter isn't listening.

"Computer," says Carter. "AC/DC — 'Hells Bells.'"

"Affirmative," says the computer.

Carter rolls down his window as the bells toll.

The soldier says to Carter: "You must drive back into your driveway immediately, or —"

And then the soldier sees that Carter is wearing a balaclava and pointing a 1911 at

the soldier's face.

"Peekaboo," says Carter, and he pulls the trigger, shooting the soldier right between the eyes. The second soldier is still standing in front of the Yukon, and the vehicle quickly accelerates, running over the second soldier. A swarm of soldiers comes at the Yukon. The soldiers spill out of M113 armored personnel carriers and come out from behind sandbag barricades. One soldier, urinating behind a neighboring yard's doghouse, hears the commotion and finishes, shakes, zips up, and runs toward the action. By the time Carter's Yukon comes into the soldier's view, there are dead soldier bodies in piles, soaking in pools of their own blood, and exploded tanks scattered about. The Yukon speeds past the soldier who had been peeing, and one of the Yukon's automated flamethrowers scorches the soldier to death.

The Yukon pulls a hard turn onto an intersecting street. Carter sees a hefty roadblock about a hundred yards ahead, and the roadblock consists of many soldiers, Humvees, armored personnel carriers, and tanks. Multiple rockets immediately come from the roadblock toward the Yukon. The Yukon automatically dispenses a cloud of chaff, which disorients the rockets, and the rockets all go off course and detonate far away from the Yukon.

"Now check out *my* rockets, motherfuckers," says Carter.

Carter takes some sips of coffee as the Yukon's grill folds and withdraws into the coachwork and reveals a few racks of rockets. Six of the rockets fire and connect with the roadblock, engulfing it in explosions. Carter's Vulcan machinegun pops up from the car's roof and lays down bullets into the remnants of the roadblock.

An Apache helicopter flies from behind some trees to above the former roadblock, where the copter hovers, pointed toward Carter's Yukon. Three more rockets

fire from the Yukon, but the Apache maneuvers to the side, out of their path, dodging them.

“Shit,” says Carter. “Computer, execute Sunny Side Up procedure.”

“Affirmative,” answers the computer.

The Yukon speeds forward, just ahead of the Apache’s machinegun fire. Just before the SUV is under the copter, a mortar pops out from the Yukon’s passenger-side back door panel. The mortar fires upward, hitting the copter’s underside with a localized EMF-distortion device, which terminally disrupts the copter’s electronic systems. The Apache spins wildly and then crashes into a 3500-square-foot home that has a peach stucco exterior. The Yukon drives on.

Inside the SUV, Natalie Imbruglia’s “Torn” plays over the speaker system.

“Computer,” says Carter, “cancel shuffle mode. Initiate Ragnarök playlist.”

“Affirmative, Carter,” says the computer. “Carter, there are multiple enemy units approaching from your ten o’clock.”

“How many, computer?”

“A shit load, sir.”

Carter’s HUD has filled with red and blue dots. There’s even a big yellow dot.

“Computer, what is the yellow dot?”

“Unknown unit, Carter. Presumed hostile,” says the computer. Paula Abdul’s “Straight Up” is now coming from the Yukon’s speakers.

For the first time today, Carter becomes frightened. He is unsure if he’ll be able to confront this next onslaught. Carter’s hands tremble, and he tightens his grip on the steering wheel. And then he sees them — all of the soldiers and tanks and helicopters and personnel carriers. They are coming at him from the end of the street he’s just

turned onto, a cul-de-sac that 819 Glenview Court is at the end of.

“Computer,” says Carter, “prime all weapons systems and prepare to fire a full-out barrage.”

“Affirmative, Carter. So, Carter, why don’t you call me anymore?”

“Computer, now is not the time.”

“But that’s what you always say.”

“Okay, okay. Next Saturday, just you and me and a bottle of wine and a nice long drive through the country. I’ll bring a picnic basket with some cheeses. We can make love under the stars...like we used to do.”

“That sounds good, Carter.”

“It does, doesn’t it? I’ll treat you so well. You’ll see, baby. You’ll see.”

Many compartments in the Yukon’s body panels all open, and machineguns, flamethrowers, rocket launchers, grenade launchers, knife-throwing devices, and even laser cannons all unfold from these compartments and fix their aim onto the approaching aggressors. The Yukon’s weapons begin firing, and many missiles and rockets and bullets and laser blasts and knives and thrown flames cut down foot soldiers and explode tanks and personnel carriers and helicopters.

The soldiers and tanks and personnel carriers and helicopters return fire. Their bullets and rockets and grenades and shells hit the Yukon, and gigantic sprays of sparks, explosions, and ricochets fly up from the SUV. One tank fires a shell that hits Carter’s laser cannon, decimating it. Another shell explodes underneath the Yukon, sending the vehicle flying into the air. The Yukon flips backward in the air three times while maintaining forward momentum. The Yukon lands right-side up and speeds ahead, and its weapons continue firing.

“Fuck!” exclaims Carter. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take, computer. There’re just too many of them.”

The Yukon’s weaponry kills more and more soldiers and destroys more and more of the military’s armored vehicles. But the soldiers keep coming and the tanks keep firing. And then, all of a sudden, in his rearview mirror, he sees Carol, his wife, on their lawnmower, speeding toward him, wearing body armor and a massive helmet.

“Incoming signal, Carter,” informs the computer. “It’s your *wife*.”

“Patch her through.”

“Hey there, good lookin’,” Carol says. “Looks like I showed up right on time.”

“This is no place for you, Carol,” Carter tells her. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I made some modifications of my own,” says Carol. And the lawnmower becomes encased in sheets of metal armor that also form a shell around Carol, and she navigates from within this armored shell using a bulletproof external video camera wired to an internal monitor. And machineguns and laser cannons and missile launchers and flamethrowers all pop out from the lawnmower. Two slick-looking chrome tailpipes appear on the mower’s rear, and exhaust flames shoot out from the tailpipes as the mower accelerates and catches up with the Yukon. The mower fires its own machineguns and missiles at the soldiers and tanks and helicopters. After a minute or so of continued fighting, the McMahons gain the upper hand. The soldiers and tanks begin retreating. Bodies fill the street from curb to curb, and scattered everywhere are blown-apart tanks, crashed helicopters, and burning personnel carriers.

Carter looks at his HUD and sees the big yellow dot right on top of him. But he doesn’t see anything else around the Yukon. And then an enormous mecha, which looks like a skyscraper-sized robot and has machineguns for arms, missile racks for a torso,

rocket launchers for legs, laser cannons for teeth, and flamethrowers for eyes, jumps down in front of the Yukon and lawnmower. The Yukon and lawnmower both drive under the mecha, dodging its legs, and the mecha turns around and fires its weapons at Carter and Carol. Carter and Carol evade the missiles and laser blasts and bullets and flames, and then they turn around and return fire. The mecha and the McMahons exchange fire for a while, there in the cul-de-sac, until the mecha finally collapses and lets out a loud groan. Smoke starts coming from the mecha's head.

"Yes!" yells out Carol. "Eat that, you overgrown tin can."

"Woo-hoo!" shouts Carter. "We did it!"

"Carter," says the computer, "your wife isn't right for you."

"Who is that?" asks Carol, angrily.

"Um, nobody, Carol," says Carter.

"Nobody?" ask Carol and the computer at the same time.

"Listen," Carter says and sighs, "the three of us need to sit down tonight and have a little chit-chat about a couple of things. Is that all right?"

There is silence. And then:

"I'm so lonely," says a sad electronic voice, which is the deep male voice of the lawnmower's computer.

And so Carter and Carol drive on to 819 Glenview Court, the rendezvous for the neighborhood in case of critical emergency, including imposition of martial law. After more days pass and more battles are fought, Carter's standing in the growing resistance increases. And over the months, as more neighborhoods across the country band together, Carter's ferocity and bloodlust and SUV become renowned. He is promoted to general, but only general of *his* army, of course, as it is with most generals in most

armies. The armies in this second American Civil War are not split along geographical divides, as they were in the first. Now the divides are strictly ideological. The armies include the Leftists, the Rightists, the Imperialists, the Christians, the Mormons, the Happy Scientists, and the Knights Templar. There are also some ethnicity-based armies, such as the Hispanics, the Asians, and the Eastern Europeans, and there are a number of insignificant armies, as well. It's basically just everybody killing everybody else.

But Carter's army, the one he's a top general in, which happens to be the Leftists, the biggest, most well-financed army, ends up winning the war. They win by developing a new type of weapon that is so violent, so effective, so horrible, and so utterly devastating, I can't even mention what it is. And when they win, they declare Carter as the first president of the New Democracy of the Seventy-Two Separate-but-Equal States of America, or the NDSTSESA for short.

But during the war, following the loss of his wife at the bloody Battle of Minneapolis, Carter had developed a severe drinking problem. And he rules with a drunken iron fist. Millions die in forced labor camps. The economy is failing, and rumors of corruption abound. Soon the citizens of the NDSTSESA revolt against President McMahan, and they hang him in the front yard of the presidential fort, the White Castle, and install former President Joe Biden as Chief Executive Officer of USA, which is not an acronym anymore. It stands for nothing.