



DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Bonus Army

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Pull your chair a little closer to the coals tonight, Carol, because this one comes to us out of the terrible summer of 1932, out of the worst of the Great Depression, and it is a true story about men who had already given everything once and were asked to give it again. They were soldiers, Carol, veterans of the World War, and in that scorching summer they came to Washington by the thousands, poor and hungry and hopeful, and they built a city of scrap and tarpaper on the mudflats across the river. And the reason I tell it by firelight is that it ends with the Army of the United States marching against its own old soldiers. Every word of it is documented, and I have never been able to tell it without my voice going quiet.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, their own veterans. I don't think I've ever heard this one told through. Take me back to the beginning. Why did all those men come to Washington in the first place?



MARTY

It began with a promise, Carol. After the World War, a grateful Congress had voted the veterans a bonus, a payment for their service, a thank-you in dollars. But there was a catch in it. The money was not to be paid out until the year 1945, more than twenty years down the road. Well, in the good times nobody minded waiting. And then the Depression fell like a hammer. Banks closed, farms failed, and men who had marched under fire in France found themselves standing in breadlines with nothing. And they began to say to one another, Carol, that a promise coming due in 1945 was no use to a hungry family in 1932. They wanted their bonus now, early, while it could still keep their children fed.

CAROL

When you put it that way it seems only fair. They'd earned it, and they were starving. So how did that turn into a march on the capital?



MARTY

It spread like a spark on dry grass. Out in Portland, Oregon, a former sergeant named Walter Waters gathered a few hundred jobless veterans and said, let us go to Washington ourselves and ask Congress to our faces. And they set out with empty pockets, Carol, hopping freight trains, riding the rails, hitching on the backs of trucks. And as word ran along the rail lines, more fell in behind them at every stop, until it was no longer hundreds but thousands rolling toward the capital from every corner of the country. They called themselves the Bonus Expeditionary Force, a soldier's joke on the old name of the army they'd served in. By that summer some twenty thousand of them had reached Washington, and more still. And here is the thing that must be understood, Carol. Many of them brought their wives. They brought their children. This was not a mob. It was families.

CAROL

Families. Marty, where does a wave of twenty thousand hungry people even sleep in a city like Washington? What did they do when they got there?



MARTY

They did what soldiers do, Carol. They organized. They found the empty ground they were allowed to use, chiefly a stretch of muddy tidal flats across the Anacostia River, and there they built themselves a town out of nothing. Packing crates and old lumber, flattened tin cans, tarpaper and burlap, whatever the city threw away. They laid it out in streets, Carol, with a rough order to it. They dug latrines, they held roll call, they saluted the flag each morning. They allowed no begging and no drinking and no trouble, because Waters knew the whole country was watching and one riot would ruin them. A newspaperman who walked through it said it was astonishing how clean and disciplined it was, this shantytown of the desperate. They named such places for the president they blamed for their misery. They called them Hoovervilles.

CAROL

A whole orderly city of the forgotten, built by hand across the river. And they were peaceful, you say. So what did the government do? Did anyone listen to them?



MARTY

For a while it looked as though someone might, Carol. Down in the House of Representatives a bill was brought to pay the bonus early, and the veterans crowded the lawns outside the Capitol to wait on the word. And the House passed it. You can imagine the cheer that went up. But then it went to the Senate, and on a hot evening in the middle of June the Senate voted it down. And this is a moment I want you to sit with, Carol. There they were, thousands of them massed outside in the dusk, having just been told their hope was dead. And what did they do? A man among them called out, and they sang. They sang America, the Beautiful, and then they turned and walked quietly back to their camp across the river. No riot. No stones. They just went home to their tarpaper, and most of them stayed, because they had nowhere on earth left to go.

CAROL

Oh, they sang. Marty, that breaks my heart more than any shouting could. So they stayed on through the summer, waiting, hoping something would change. What broke it? Something must have broken it.



MARTY

It broke on the twenty-eighth of July, Carol. The government had decided to clear the veterans out of some abandoned buildings they'd occupied downtown, along Pennsylvania Avenue near the Capitol. The police came to move them, and in the pushing and shoving that followed, it turned ugly, and two policemen fired their revolvers. Two veterans were shot and killed. Men who had survived the machine guns of France, Carol, dead on a Washington street over a bonus. And President Herbert Hoover, told the police had lost control, made his decision. He ordered the United States Army to clear the downtown district of the veterans. And to carry out that order he turned to the Army's own Chief of Staff, General Douglas MacArthur.

CAROL

The Army against them. Marty, surely the orders were just to move them along, gently. It couldn't have been more than that, could it?



MARTY

The orders were limited, Carol, to clear the downtown buildings and no further. But what happened went far, far beyond them. Late that afternoon MacArthur assembled a force at the foot of the Capitol as if for war. Infantry with fixed bayonets. A troop of cavalry on horseback with drawn sabers, led by a dashing major named George Patton. Six tanks rumbling up Pennsylvania Avenue. And at MacArthur's side, an aide who thought the whole thing a terrible mistake and said so, a young major named Dwight Eisenhower. They loosed tear gas in rolling clouds, Carol, and the soldiers drove the unarmed veterans and their wives and children before them through the smoke, the horses and the bayonets pushing them back street by street. And the crowds of Washington who had come to watch stood horrified, because these were the soldiers of the United States driving the old soldiers of the United States out of their own capital.

CAROL

Their own men, on horseback, with gas. Marty, and the families, the children were right there in it. Please tell me MacArthur stopped at the buildings, the way he was ordered.



MARTY

He did not stop, Carol. That is the heart of the shame of it. President Hoover, twice, sent word that the Army was not to cross the river into the great camp on the Anacostia flats. And MacArthur, told his men were tired and that he would not be bothered by orders, crossed the bridge anyway. That night the soldiers went into the Hooverville, the tarpaper city the veterans had built with their own hands, and they put it to the torch. And by dark the whole camp was burning, Carol, a red glow against the summer sky, thousands of families streaming out into the night carrying what little they could, their homes and their few belongings turning to ash and cinders behind them. Men were hurt in the gas and the fire. And in the days after, a baby, an infant born in that camp, died, the doctors said, from the effects of the tear gas. Driven out with fire and gas by the country they had marched to war to defend.

CAROL

A baby. Oh, Marty. After everything those men had already given. How does a country even carry a thing like that?



MARTY

It carried it hard, Carol. The next morning the newspapers ran the photographs, the burning camp, the smoke over the river, the bayonets. And the nation looked at those pictures and was sickened to its soul. The sight of the Army of the United States making war on its own veterans and their children horrified ordinary people everywhere. It clung to Herbert Hoover like a shroud, and that November the voters turned him out and sent Franklin Roosevelt to the White House in his place. And in the end, Carol, some years on, Congress voted at last to pay the bonus early, over the president's own veto. The men got their due. But not the summer of 1932 back, and not that child. They were old soldiers who asked only for what they had been promised, and their country answered them with cavalry and flame. That is the story, and it is all true. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of those men riding the rails toward Washington with nothing but a promise in their pockets, and how they stood in the dusk and sang for a country that would soon set fire to their homes. Hold your veterans gently, remember what was asked of them and what they gave, and always, always come back to the fire.

