

Excerpts from

Griswoldville and Dark Full of Enemies

two novels by Jordan M. Poss

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from *Griswoldville*, Part III: Miles Gloriosus

Griswoldville is the memoir of Georgie Wax, a farmboy growing up in rural Georgia during the Civil War. In this passage, the Union army has reached northwestern Georgia. With his father and uncle already serving in the Confederate army in Virginia, Georgie finds himself, at the age of fourteen, drafted into the state militia along with his grandfather and cousins. Georgie quickly finds that war is not the chivalric adventure he expected.

approx. 3100 words

During this time I saw the first man I ever saw killed in the army. He was a private about my own age in another company. We had marched fifteen miles and had just been ordered to fall out and bivouac in a pecan grove by the roadside when he walked behind a pack mule. I do not know whether it was something the boy did, or an accidental flash of sunlight on a buckle or bayonet or tin cup, or just a mule being a mule, but the mule planted its forelegs and struck back with both hindlegs and caught this boy full in the side of the head with one ironshod hoof. I saw it happen—he went down like a cut clothesline, just sank in place, his head spilling into the ditch. The mule made not a sound, even when a weeping Negro teamster commenced to whipping it.

We gathered in a crowd around the boy while his squadmates—two brothers, his father, and an uncle among them—stood over him, beseeching him return. I saw clearly the shoe-shaped stamp in the cranium, the warping of the temporal and parietal bones underneath the broken and bleeding scalp. The eyes rolled unfocused in their sockets as the men cradled and shook him. They ceased only when the surgeon came and examined him. First Sergeant Sloane came and dispersed the rest of us.

We felt low for some time after that. I recall settling down in the shade of a big pecan tree, unbuckling my belt, and unshouldering my pack, canteen, haversack, and cartridge box, with no enjoyment of the rest whatsoever. Cal wiped away tears. We broke out rations and ate in silence for some time.

At last, Wes said, “What kind of—of dummy walks behind a mule like that?”

“Come on, now, Wes,” Cal said.

“Ain’t no more sense than a chicken.”

“Speak no ill of the dead,” I said.

“Aw, hell, we’re all sitting here mooning over him. He wasn’t looking out. Everybody knows you don’t walk behind a horse or a mule like that.”

“That’s enough, Wes,” my grandfather said. Wes hushed. My grandfather put away his mess kit and brought out his pipe. “He was tired. Could’ve been any one of us.”

I thought about that for a long time.

Not long after, a man in our own company accidentally shot himself with his musket. When we first heard of it, we took it to be a self-inflicted wound—we had

all heard the stories of men shooting off their thumbs so they could go home without giving in to the craven urge to desert. But soon the whole camp was full of the sound of his dying, and we went to have a look. He lay gut-shot in the shade of the regimental surgeon's tent. They had pulled aside his shirt so that the belly lay exposed among a wreath of bloody rags that had been his uniform. A thumb-sized hole with ragged arms like stars opened his insides to the world and fairly poured out blood, which the surgeon and his orderlies were much busied in washing away and trying to stanch. He moaned and moaned and occasionally cursed. I reckon now that he was shot through the stomach and a part of the liver, and that the vital organ took some persuading to fail. To this day I do not know how he did it. He lasted four hours, well into the night as we tried to sleep. When he finally died, the silence disturbed us.

There were other losses. Two of the older men died of pneumonia and another lay down after a long march in the heat of August and never got up. I saw some of the preparations for their burials, and silently compared them to the funerals I had attended back home—I thought often of my grandmother. Here was a different rite: whatever prayers and scriptures were read when the body lay finally interred, here the late soldier's fellows—full of regret, yes, but eagerly—divided his wealth, if not his garments, and wound him in a blanket. Someone might say a prayer of his own invention, tailored to the dead man, and then drill, or inspection, or pitching or striking tents, or the march would resume.

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During the months we spent in reserve we marched hundreds of miles, never coming nearer the combat than earshot, and at distances at which the cannonade proved indistinguishable from the afternoon thunderstorms Georgians know from birth. We ran out of good food and meat and ate into our stock ofhardtack. Sometimes we had to boil it to render it edible, and more than one man broke teeth trying to eat it, especially when our lack of vitamins weakened our gums' hold on our teeth. Any fruit or bread the militia acquired through requisition we immediately gorged ourselves upon. We used the bayonet for digging more than anything else, and used the shovel and pick more often than the rifle. Our collars and caps wilted, browned, and warped. We sweated our brogans full to sloshing and our socks rotted on our feet; holes bloomed at our knees, elbows, and armpits as we marched, as we worked, as we drilled. The lice multiplied. Our war was dust and fatigue and stops to dig trenches or prepare breastworks for the army to fall back to when, inevitably—and to the great fury of the newspapermen and the enlisted strategists in our camp—it did.

I learned also that we were not all of us soldiers in common. Despite President Davis's urging forward of conscription for the national armies in the East and West—as if in fulfilment of my grandfather's presentiments—Governor Brown husbanded Georgia's resources, especially its manpower. While the volunteer regiments went off to Virginia or elsewhere, the militia remained at home, subject to militia authority and militia command and resistant to all efforts by the commanders of the national army to commandeer them. This dispute was part of the reason we

remained in reserve, and a great part of the reason the national soldiers grew to resent us.

Once, while digging earthworks and placing chevaux de frise on the west bank of the Chattahoochee near Buckhead, a squadron of Wheeler's cavalry rode by, heading north to Marietta. A young lieutenant at their head nodded to Captain Guerard as he passed, but the men following showed no such deference to their peers.

"Well, if it ain't Joe Brown's pets," a corporal called out. This was the first time I heard the nickname.

"Here's your mule," a man shouted back from down the line.

"Y'all be careful," another cavalryman said. "I hear there's folk around these parts that'll shoot a body if'n you cross them."

"Yeah," another said. "Lucky they's easy to identify. Y'all seen any men in blue coats?"

"Bugger off," Peter's grandfather said.

"Now now," the corporal said, and laughed. "Y'all see any strangers wearing blue, you just send for the cavalry, hear? Don't want to ask too much of the upstanding yokelry."

Thereafter we heard the name "Joe Brown's Pets" nearly every time a unit of the Confederate army passed, which—the more we worked on Atlanta's fortifications, and the nearer the enemy pressed upon them—was often. It often came goodnaturedly, but even when delivered with a grin and a comradely wave it had a sting in it, and like all such jokes it grew tiresome. It proved especially hard to take

coming from the lean and battle-weary men who threw the epithet our way, some of whom had bloodstains on their coats. The more bitter among them passed stories, generously leavened with oaths, that the governor aimed to settle separately with the enemy and thus betray the rest of the Confederate states. We gritted our teeth and endured it, and sometimes shouted back. I thought of Sir Launcelot, the noble knight humiliated by his ride in the cart, and longed for a chance to prove ourselves in battle.

Our daily duties grew especially onerous under this barrage of resentment. I looked forward with dread to picket duty, not because of danger but because of boredom. My mind wandered; I wished I could read instead or be back on the farm swimming. I cleaned my pistol or simply worked the mechanisms, wondering at the soft and precise clicking as I spun the cylinder or cocked and lowered the hammer. But I had to limit my use of the pistol—I was afraid to break it. Conversation, which was forbidden on picket duty anyway, proved little help in assuaging the boredom.

“Ivanhoe never stood watch in no picket line,” I said to Wes one night.

He shushed me.

“King Richard the Lionheart never stood no picket duty,” I said.

He shushed me again.

“Nor Robin Hood neither.”

He did not immediately shush me. I waited. “What about his merry men?”

I had not anticipated this tack. “What?”

“Who guarded Robin Hood’s camp in Sherwood Forest?”

I said nothing.

“Surely the merry men stood picket duty?”

“Don’t go being foolish,” I said, feebly.

“The sheriff was all the time looking for them—surely somebody kept an eye out for him, too.”

“I—”

“And most of the time wasn’t nothing for them to see. But they had to be ready. Just like picket duty.”

“Oh, hush.”

“Look who’s telling who to hush now.”

“Maybe the Sheriff of Nottingham was a Yankee,” I said.

“Say what?”

Before my feint could work, the third man at our post, Peter’s grandfather, shushed the both of us.

When I had to stand watch without my cousins, or alone, I passed the time by mulling my favorite stories, making up a few of my own, or, especially, concocting heraldic blazons for our regimental and company colors. The state flag proved easy enough—*gules, an arch and three columns or &c.*—but I spent long hours puzzling over our battle flag. After some days, I had settled on *gules, a saltire azure charged with thirteen mullets argent*. I remained unsure how to account for the fimbriations, the white borders of the blue cross, and occupied myself for hours yet in shifting this subordinate back and forth through my primitive blazon. I did the same with the many other flags I saw as the army I wished I belonged to passed us by.

Illness struck the camp. After the first few weeks, every man and boy in the camp rose with a cough every morning. The elder men spat huge quantities of phlegm; the boys hawked and hawked and produced little, but nevertheless strove for the appearance of a manly pulmonary complaint. This cough only worsened when the weather turned cold, with even my grandfather stricken and struggling, as I shall relate.

Other problems were acute—diarrhoea in particular, looked upon now as an inconvenience and sometime subject of fun but which killed a few of the older men in the late summer. Every halt saw men hastening to fencerails and fallen trees to squat shivering on the side of the road until we marched on again. Serious cases fell out while still marching and then hastened to catch up; there are few sights more pathetic than an old man with the trots trying to run while burdened with gear to reclaim his place in a moving column. A few men tried to remedy such complaints by eating nothing but fresh fruit—purloined from orchards we passed—but more often this only aggravated the condition.

In our squad alone, Cal, Peter, his grandfather, Private Bell, and Hoyt Burrell were all stricken with diarrhoea at the same time. We were marching and making poor time because of it. Fortunately, we halted once by a farm beside the road.

There were peach trees growing along the road and some of the men set to picking their fruit. The lady of the house appeared and stepped down from the porch, causing a few of the men to fall back to the road and shamefacedly hide their plunder. She waved them back over.

“No, no, no—you men’s welcome to them. Ain’t no help to pick them no more. The peaches might as well go to the army, too.” She was a plump but pretty woman no older than thirty. A pair of small girls who much resembled her appeared in the door of the house. I looked at the woman again and noticed she wore her mourning. “Come on, now,” she said, and waved again.

I looked across the road to where half my squad and a good portion of the company sought a place out of sight of the lady to do the quick step, and looked back at the lady and the house. I stepped up to her and removed my hat. She looked me up and down, expressionless.

“Yes, young man?”

“I’m sorry to see you’re in mourning, ma’am.”

She took a moment in answering. “Thank you, son.”

“Your husband, ma’am?”

She nodded. “Joined at the start of it. Kilt two years ago. And my father and brother, too, God rest their souls.”

“I’m most sorry, ma’am.”

“I appreciate it. The Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away. Him and the Yankees.”

“Blessed be the name of the Lord,” I said, and ignored the Yankees. “My father been gone since the beginning, too. I’m thankful to say he’s well—least, the last time we heard from him. Now I’m gone from home.”

She simply nodded.

“I don’t mean to be improper, ma’am, but our company is afflicted. I don’t want to impose, but if you’d allow me to, I’d appreciate some soot from your chimney.”

She seemed surprised by that, but after a moment, said, “You learn that from your mama?”

“Yes, ma’am. And her daddy, too. He’s here with me and two of my cousins.”

She surveyed the men in her trees, resting in the road, or trying to conceal themselves to conduct their agonized evacuations. She looked at me again. “All right. Come on in.”

The house was not much bigger than our own. The two girls shied from the door and watched from behind the table as I entered and went to the chimney.

“Private, uh—”

“Wax, ma’am.”

“Private Wax, this here’s Ruth and Rebecca. Say hey, girls.”

They greeted me. I said, “Why, there’s a Rebecca in one of my favorite stories. *Ivanhoe*. Y’all read it?”

Ruth and Rebecca shook their heads. Their mother stepped past me to the hearth and said, “Can’t nobody read in this house now their daddy’s gone.”

I looked at the girls, who still stood watching me. I thought I saw some trace of shame cross their faces. While the lady swung the pot out of the embers, I dropped most of my equipment, especially the cartridge box. I took my knife and tin cup from my haversack, pulled my handkerchief over my nose, and leaned into the chimney from the hearth. The fire had burned very low but the chimney was stifling

hot; I scraped as quickly as I could against the blackened back of the fireplace and caught the soot and ash in the cup. This accomplished, I lurched back out of the fireplace and caught my breath.

“Thank you,” I said. I indicated the cup of chimney soot. “I appreciate it.”

The lady nodded. I put my gear back on and stepped outside. Lieutenant Guerard had just ordered the men to fall in; the march would continue.

“What you got there, Private?” he said as I fell in.

I showed him the cup, careful to hold it level, and gestured toward where the last of the stricken men hobbled back to the column from the weeds. He did not seem to understand but grunted and mounted his horse again.

I tipped my kepi to the lady and her girls as I left. The younger of the girls waved.

At our next stop on the march, my grandfather had every man afflicted with diarrhoea produce his cup and a spoon, and I mixed in a measure of the soot. They stirred in the ash and let it settle, and then drank all but the dregs. I also warned them off of unripe fruit. Later, as we bivouacked for the night, my grandfather found a patch of blackberries, from which we gathered both overflowing hatfuls of berries and a good amount of the roots, which he boiled to make a tea and then passed around to the men. The affliction did not disappear entirely, but most of the men had recovered by the next day. Hoyt, who had used to pester me about my pistol, proved especially grateful, and began to treat me less like a boy and more like a fellow soldier. A few who knew me as *Georgie* began to call me *Surgie*, and came to me for other ailments. Between myself and my grandfather’s prodigious

memory, we could often provide remedies—the soot, blackberry root, and peach tree root for the flux, mayapple for its equally painful opposite, onion poultices or raw peppermint leaves for the colds and coughs that woke us daily, walnut leaf poultices for open sores and infected blisters, peach tree leaf poultices for poison ivy or the stone bruises that afflicted men as their shoes gave out, and others without number. The many older men came for help with their arthritis, for which I had to consult my grandfather—I was yet unacquainted with arthritic pain in those days. He foraged for ginseng and found some on the north-facing bank of a cool hollow through which a creek flowed; he dug up the fleshy white roots, made a whole pot of tea out of it, and had the men rub the leavings on their joints. One old man from another company had been carrying a buckeye in his pocket as a magical cure; my grandfather told him to throw it away and gave him a canteen full of the tea instead. Other remedies proved hard to come by—anything we knew that involved honey, especially for coughs, proved difficult, since honey was hard to come by except by the good graces of farmers past whose farms we happened to march. We did what we could with what we had or could come by. I pray that we did some good.

I thought often of the lady and her daughters after that, and wished I had left them with something as thanks and to help, if only slightly, to relieve their situation. But I do not know what I could have given. I have passed back through that part of Georgia since, but found no trace of them, their farm, or even the peach trees along the road. The war, in one way or another, took all.

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from *Dark Full of Enemies*, chapter 7

Dark Full of Enemies is a World War II adventure in which Marine Captain Joe McKay, a wounded veteran of the Pacific theatre, is tasked with leading a commando operation into Nazi-occupied Norway, deep into the 24-hour winter night north of the Arctic Circle. In addition to a talkative South African demolitions expert and a stoic Finnish sniper, his team includes an old friend from his college days, a friend who brings personal troubles along on the mission. In this passage, McKay and his team finally arrive at a Norwegian resistance safehouse near their objective.

approx. 2,000 words

The Petersen house stood on the water at the near end of the town, a sturdy two-story building like a chalet or cabin, but of more comfortable proportions. Two or three outbuildings stood in the snowy yard, and a wharf big enough for the sixty-footer reached out to them across the water. No other boats nodded at the dock—it was their own. The Petersens, McKay decided, were well-off.

He also noticed, a minute or so before they docked, that no lights burned. The house stood dark on the shore.

They had almost reached the dock when one man appeared on it. Petersen came on deck for the first time in hours and waved to him. They said nothing as the boat slowed and sidled toward the dock. Petersen threw the man a line and Jørgen brought the *Hardråde* to a perfect stop beside the pier, not even bumping the dock until their own wake pushed them softly against it.

McKay waited in the door of the cabin. Someone doused the cabin light and he and the team stood ready, all gear strapped on and ready for hauling. He watched Petersen.

The man on the dock did not tie them off but belayed the rope around the top of a piling and leaned back on the line. He looked around once and jerked his head at Petersen. Petersen stepped up onto the dock and waved McKay forward.

McKay swung through the cabin door at a trot, skip-stepped to the top of the gunwale and in another bound leapt onto the wharf. Petersen had already stridden off toward the dark house. McKay gave his men a hand up onto the pier and then a shove after Petersen. As soon as Ollila, the last in line, left the boat and trotted for the house, McKay dashed ahead of the team to catch up with Petersen. He looked around, listened. They moved quietly despite their eighty or more pounds of equipment, crates, and cans. They had packed carefully.

He caught up with Petersen as the Norwegian rounded the house. He fell in beside him but said nothing. Talk could wait.

The house, McKay could now see, was set back into the swell of a hill. The rest of Grettisstad stood above them, two hundred or more yards off and partly hidden by another fold of the earth. He looked for other houses along the waterfront and saw a few dark shapes on the water farther up the fjord and, like the town, partly hidden by the terrain and a few small trees. The Petersens had privacy.

The hill behind the house came up almost to the second story, where there was a door and a small wooden stoop. Beside the stoop, a long stack of firewood, leaning against a chest-high fence set a few feet from the house, stretched the whole

length of the back wall. In the gap between the house and the fence—a railing, McKay realized—a staircase led down into the earth.

Just then the church bells of Grettisstad pealed out of the darkness and silence. McKay started at the noise and looked uphill. Across the snowy knoll the bright church spire stood, still and steady in the streetlight glow above the roofs of the village. The bells rang loud, uncannily loud after the long silences of the trip in from the submarine.

McKay risked a whisper to Petersen. “What is that?”

Petersen said nothing, but led them down the stairs behind the firewood. McKay, with another glance at the church spire, followed.

At the bottom of the stairs, Petersen let them through a heavy door into a dark room. full of cold, damp air. McKay sensed stone walls even before Petersen turned on the lights.

“Cozy,” Stallings said as he filed in.

McKay did not like it. They stood in a rock-walled cellar perhaps twelve feet by fifteen feet wide. The effective space was even smaller—empty wineracks lined the room. A card table with folding legs leaned in one corner. There were no chairs or beds, but McKay did see rolled straw pallets on the racks in another corner. And he was unconcerned with comfort, anyway. What bothered him were the lack of windows and the single exit, a door at the foot of a stairwell, a door narrow enough for one man to block, especially a man as large as Petersen, who stooped in the doorway now, already drawing the door shut behind him.

McKay grabbed the door. “We need to talk.”

“Later,” Petersen said. He tested the door, gave it a little pull. McKay did not let go.

“We need to talk. I have to see the dam at least once, for planning.”

“I say again, impossible.”

McKay said nothing. He held firmly to the door.

Petersen said, “I have to report to Narvik, if you recall.”

“Now?”

“They know the speed of our boats. They reported our time and position. If I am late, they will guess I detoured and want to know why.”

“All right. When you get back, then.”

Petersen, still gripping the door, looked at him for the first time since landing. He said, “Yes.” McKay let go of the door and Petersen pulled it almost shut, then stopped and leaned back into the room. He jerked his head back, toward the church, where the bells still rang. “Happy Christmas,” he said, and shut the door.

They stood still and silent for a moment, none of them looking at each other.

“Well, the hell with this,” Stallings said.

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Alone now, they checked their gear. McKay checked his own before doublechecking his men’s, starting with weapons and going through everything. He wanted to make sure nothing had been lost, broken, or destroyed in the transfers along the way. They spent time inspecting the radio and its individual parts. If they could not destroy the dam, McKay wanted at least to deliver a serviceable radio to the Norwegians. When

they had finished, they checked everything again, and then McKay set them into the long haul of loading magazines.

Ollila—with his bolt-action Mauser—excepted, each of them carried ten magazines for their submachine guns—300 rounds per man, every one loaded by hand. McKay had not had them load the magazines before departing, a precautionary measure. The larger a magazine, the more tension the spring sustained when fully loaded, and the more likely to break and jam the weapon. The submachine gun the Germans carried had a 32-round magazine but they seldom loaded it to capacity precisely to prevent jams. And the likelihood of a jam increased the longer the full magazines sat unused, the springs bracing uselessly against the stack of bullets above them. McKay had seen weapons jam in combat and, with the odds already so heavily against them as a four-man team in enemy territory, he would not have malfunction against them, too.

Now, though, he felt they had reason to load. He did not want to be caught here of all places. He tried not to think of the effect of three submachine guns in such a tiny place, or of how they might escape if they managed to shoot their way out and up the stairs—the firewood could provide good cover, but a single man on the stoop above could kill every one of them with plunging fire. He focused on the task as a step toward assaulting the dam.

They pulled out the card table and set it up. Without chairs the table proved nearly useless, so McKay had them fold the legs back up and they rested the table on their packs. They sat Indian style on the floor, one of their ammo crates open in the middle of them like a platter at Sunday dinner. Or Christmas dinner.

The holiday had snuck up on McKay. He had thought of it a few times since returning to England, and he had even heard—without noticing—the Coventry Carol on the wireless in the pub the night he decked the Aussie, but since then he had been... distracted. He owed his family a card and a letter. Perhaps even Sally. He felt an old longing reawaken in him like new pain in an old wound and scoffed and shook his head. He would take care of it when they returned.

He watched the team for a moment. Every filled magazine went into a stack beside the crate on the table, where they each dipped in a hand as needed and brought out smaller cardboard boxes marked pistol ball caliber .45. Ollila had pitched in and sat thumbing the squabby rounds along with them. Graves worked quickly, nattering to himself from time to time. Stallings worked slowest, almost absentmindedly. He seemed to have trouble seating the rounds in the slot at the top of the magazine, and even tried to put a few rounds in backwards before stopping himself and turning the bullet over, laboriously, with fingers from both hands, and snapping into place with the others.

Stallings looked up and saw McKay watching him. He looked as if he had been caught stealing. McKay said nothing.

Stallings managed a grin and held up his box of pistol ammo.

“First time since I’ve been in the Army I’ve got to open presents on Christmas.”

McKay laughed despite himself. Graves snickered. “Bloody right.”

Ollila looked at Stallings, at McKay, and then returned to his work. He looked doubtful. McKay would have to talk to Ollila, soon.

“Don’t guess we can get some eggnog or something here?” Stallings said.

“You can drink when we get back to England,” McKay said.

“Toss that stuff,” Graves said. “Give me a tot of rum, or whiskey. Don’t see the point in hiding your alcohol.”

Stallings grinned and looked at McKay. “That’s always been my philosophy,” he said.

McKay laughed.

It had been nearly Christmas and time for a trip home when Stallings had finally gotten kicked out of Clemson.

It was that car of his. Stallings drove an old Ford. He had put his skills—his talents—to use in modifying the engine. Their trips between Clemson and Rabun County, Stallings’s home in North Carolina, or any other mountainous place on the winding and dangerous highways, had frightened Keener more than their mountain climbing, and had probably been more dangerous.

McKay had had inklings of what Stallings got up to on his weekends, those rare weekends when he and Keener did not plan something or when Stallings was determined to cause trouble. He would disappear at the first opportunity after classes and drill on Friday and reappear, disheveled and hungover if not still drunk, in the early hours of Monday morning. His car would have new dents at the corners, some new knock or rattle in the engine, and mud up to the windows. McKay and their friends, with varying degrees of patience, would get him sobered up. It was easier in winter—they would make a trip down the hill to the Seneca River and throw

him in. Sobered and dressed in time for drill, Stallings would survive another week, rebuild the engine when he should have been studying, and disappear again. Repeat.

McKay always resisted losing his patience and his temper and always failed. Once upon finding Stallings leaning halfway into the engine of the Ford after missing class, he had shouted, sworn, and said, “Grove, if you put half the ingenuity into class as you did into that damn car, you’d be captain of cadets.”

Stallings just raised himself out of the car, grinned, and tipped his cap.

They had a week left of the fall semester, senior year, when the real captain of the corps of cadets came for them. Specifically, for McKay. He had just returned from dinner in town with Sally and lay down to read in his barracks room. He left the book—*Robinson Crusoe*—open on his bunk. It was weeks, after Christmas and into the new year, before he resumed the story.