

## Following Lindbergh

By Matthew Dunn

"It's a conspiracy, John," Andrew whispered. Pulling the bed blanket over his head, he gazed into the flashlight-illuminated green eyes of his best friend, searching for empathy.

John said nothing, staring back blankly as if his mind were a million miles away.

"They're all in this together," Andrew insisted. "You'd have to be some kind of moron not to see that. And you're no moron, John." Holding John's gaze, he confided that he did not believe what his sister had said about John, that his skull contained nothing more than a pocket of stale, toy factory air; that John was incapable of human emotion; void of all "sense and sensibility." *Whatever that meant.*

"Katie is in high school now and she likes to blabber big words; likes the attention it gets from Mom and Dad. I'd bet she doesn't even know what half of them mean."

Andrew paused, waiting for John's ever subtle nod of agreement. It didn't come, but Andrew knew that was just John's way and so he pressed on, confident in their blood-brother pact.

"They don't want us to be happy," Andrew said. "None of them do." He poked his head out from under the covers, checking the sneaker-and-faded-jean-littered room for trespassers. All was quiet. He pulled the flap back over his head.

"The area is secure," he said. "We need to make a plan."

“Andrew!” his mother suddenly yelled from the stair landing. “Get down here right now and eat your breakfast. We have to be at the airport in one hour, so shake a leg.”

Startled, Andrew cut the light and froze. Then, he tilted his head forward, searching for the telltale clippity-clop of his mother’s leopard-spotted slippers retreating back into the kitchen. In his nine years, he had come to know her persistence well. She would stand like a stalking cat for what seemed like hours, keenly listening for the tiniest of sounds—evidence that her son was awake and had indeed heard her marching orders. *Hot damn, that woman is crafty*, Andrew thought. She was, but this morning he was up to the task.

“Shhh,” he whispered to John. “The enemy is at the gate.”

The house fell silent, seized by the momentary calm. Outside, birds chirped happily as squirrels searched for the nuts they’d hidden last fall, oblivious to the standoff just beyond their sight. A jogger ran by checking his watch for his time at the half-mile mark. The blue house with white shutters and a “For Sale” sign staked in the front yard was the man’s checkpoint—Andrew’s house. Alarmed by his poor showing, the man frowned and increased his pace, never noticing that the sign in front of the modest, middleclass home now read “SOLD!”

“Mom!” Andrew then heard his sister yell. “The coffee pot is making that funny gurgling noise again.”

“Oh, Christ,” Andrew’s mother mumbled. She then clippity-clopped to the rescue, her voice fading like the jogger’s footfall, “You have exactly two minutes to get down here, young man.”

Andrew smiled. He and John would only need one.

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Andrew pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and slumped down into it like an old, secondhand-store rag doll. “I don’t feel good,” he groaned.

His sister Katie, sitting directly across from him, her ravaged plate a placid puddle of maple syrup, rolled her eyes and moaned.

“Take an aspirin,” his father’s voice echoed from behind a wall of newsprint.

“This isn’t like going to school, Andrew,” his mother said. She was hovering over him now, delivering pancakes and eggs with a silver ladle and a raised eyebrow. “So don’t let thoughts of playing hooky get loose in that brain of yours. You’ll only get yourself worked into a dither. Paris is beautiful city and you’re going to love it there.” She loaded his plate, erecting a steaming pile aimed at diverting his attentions if only long enough to board the plane she vowed to have them all on when it lifted off the tarmac.

“Now,” she added in a more soothing voice. “Sit up and eat your breakfast.”

A prisoner on hunger strike, Andrew didn’t budge.

“Maybe you’d rather have *French* toast,” Katie said sarcastically. “Or some *French* fries.”

“Shut up!” Andrew snapped back. Reluctantly, he set John on the table next to his plate, carefully releasing his grip so he didn’t tip over. He then picked up his fork and attacked his mother’s bribe, betrayed by his grumbling stomach.

“Why did you paint his eyes green?” Katie asked. “And why do you keep calling him John? His name is Joe. GI Joe. They’re all called Joe. Didn’t you read the box he came in? Not Willy or Sam or John. Joe!”

“He’s Captain John Miller and he’s on a secret mission to get me out of France.”

“It’s not much of a secret now,” Katie giggled. “And we’re not even in France yet, you simpleton!”

“Don’t call your brother names, Katherine,” Andrew’s mother said sharply.

There was a rumple of paper—a tranquil sail troubled by a sudden gust of wind.

“Wait a minute,” Andrew’s father said, emerging from the outside world. “Wasn’t that Tom Hank’s character in the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*?”

Andrew’s hearted jumped a beat. He quickly stuffed a fork-full of scrambled egg into his mouth to camouflage his guilt for watching the off-limits “horrific and gory” movie his mother had given to his father for his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was both horrific *and* gory, not to mention terrifying *and* exhilarating, holding him wide-eyed *and* breathless for nearly three hours while his parents dined with the weird couple from across the street, Horace and Edwina Jolly.

The neighboring Jolly's lived up to their name, Andrew thought, giggling as they said hello and shook your hand, laughing when you told them how old you were and chuckling as they waved goodbye oddly, like the Queen of England did on television. They would have been tolerable had they had a son to pal around with, but they were "agreeably childless," his mother explained, parenting six cats and a parrot who sang repeatedly "Pussycat, pussycat, I love you, Yes, I do!" whenever visitors appeared at the door. Andrew had labeled them weird after seeing the huge pair of gold masks hanging on the basement game room wall. They were grotesquely morphed human faces, one holding a demented clown smile as if frozen in the middle of dropping elephant dung on some poor woman's head and the other mask the same poor woman's petrified expression of gloom. Strangely, the masks looked like the Jollys themselves and it creeped Andrew out big time, giving him a shiver every time he thought of them. "They represent comedy and tragedy, the universal symbol for theatre," his mother would tell him as she brushed the cat hair from his clothes following one of their neighborly visits.

"They won't let you take him on the plane, you know," Katie said. "A terrorist could pull one of his legs off and stab the pilot with it."

"Katie?!" her mother shrieked. "Don't say things like that."

"Well, he could," she insisted.

“Unlikely,” Andrew’s father said before raising his ink-blotted sail once again and drifting off to strange lands, exotic people and the local opposition to a proposed Wal-Mart Supercenter.

“Andrew, put him in your suitcase just to be safe,” Andrew’s mother suggested.

With a sign loud enough to de-jolly the Jollys next door, Andrew shook his head and emptied onto his pancakes what little syrup his sister had left for him, desperate to drown his sorrow in flour, butter and tree sap. In a few hours, he was moving to France. *Hot damn*, he thought discouragingly.

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“Try not to look so bored, dear,” Andrew’s mother said to him. “And sit up straight.”

But Andrew couldn’t help it. He was bored. And unmistakably, he was homesick already. He missed his house, his room, his posters of Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez. Were the Yankee games on television in France? Did they even know what baseball was? Sitting in the airport, he suddenly yearned to hold his baseball glove, to feel the soft leather in the palm of his hand. *If only I was a professional ballplayer, I wouldn’t have to go to France.* He wished John was there so they could work on a plan to become one. But John was buried amongst the balled-up socks in his suitcase, which was on conveyor belt headed toward the plane that was going to fly them across the Atlantic Ocean, or so his father claimed.

Bobby Bailey — “Dandelion-death Baily”, as he was known in fourth-grade circles — was the kid who would be taking Andrew’s spot at third base on the Ace Hardware Giants,

his Little League team. His former team, that is. Roger was a year older than Andrew, tall for his age and had a perpetual need to empty his bladder. All summer long, he would unzip and pepper every yellow-flowered weed he saw, sometimes even when stationed in left field during an opponent's at-bat when Mr. Jones, the volunteer park groundskeeper, hadn't mowed in while. Rumor had it that Bobby's mother was a gardening freak who had turned her son into the all-natural watering can. But other than his constant pissing, Bobby was a friendly and pliable boy that Andrew hated just the same for the simple reason that he would be the Giants new third baseman.

"The guy couldn't catch a ball if you walked over and handed it to him," Andrew mumbled.

"What dear?" his mother asked. "What did you say?"

"Nothin'," Andrew replied. He looked over at his sister, Katie, who uncharacteristically hadn't said a word in over ten minutes. Immersed in a colorful magazine filled with movie stars whose faces Andrew recognized, she sat several seats away from her family. Thin wires bled from beneath her hair like weave extensions and trickled over her shoulder before disappearing beneath her rhinestone-bedazzled denim jacket. A muted orchestra of guitars emanated from her as if she had a band playing on a stage inside her head.

"Can I get an iPod, Mom?" Andrew asked. He really didn't want one, but his sister had one so why shouldn't he? So what if he didn't like music that much, it looked cool. He

wouldn't put crap on it like the stuff Katie's liked, though. Her music sucked. The oldies that his mother played in the kitchen were better than that. Maybe if he talked his mother into buying herself one she'd get tired of it and give it to him? Not a bad plan. He thought of John and how cramped he must feel in the suitcase. *At least the socks he's covered with are clean.*

Without looking up from her own magazine, his mother provided her standard reply, "When you get older, dear."

"Where did Dad go?" Andrew asked.

"He went to get a book," his mother answered. "It's a long flight across the Atlantic Ocean, seven or eight hours I imagine. You know how antsy your father gets if he doesn't have something to read."

"Can I get a book?"

Andrew's mother looked up, surprised. A tiny smile fluttered across her face. "Sure," she said, relishing the moment. "Your father should be over there in that bookstore somewhere."

Andrew stood up and headed off in the direction she was pointing.

"But if you don't see him in there, don't go wandering off to look for him," she shouted. "Come right back and I'll give you some money for a book."

Andrew ignored her and kept walking; hoping that the strange faces surrounding him would believe the loud woman was talking to someone else—some stupid kid.

Inside the bookstore, Andrew found his father entranced in front of a wall of global headlines—Bombs rattle Baghdad! Artic Ice Melt Accelerating! Bush Popularity Declining! Britney in Rehab, Again?

“Mom said I could buy a book,” Andrew said. His father responded with a GI John-like nod, invisible. Then, he pointed his son toward the young adult book section.

Andrew scanned the shelves. To his dismay, there were no comic books. He walked over to the magazine rack. There were no baseball weekly’s or Yankee Yearbooks. And no comic books there, either. Sensing his mother’s commanding eye, he went back to the young adults.

Almost every title, it seemed, had Harry Potter this and Harry Potter that blazed on an orange, blue or green checkerboard binding. Andrew hated Harry Potter, almost as much as Dandelion-death Bailey. He squatted down to check out the lower shelves and then pulled a red book out, a thick one with a picture of a dragon on the cover. He fanned through the pages. *Too many*, he thought before carefully putting it back exactly where he’d found it. *Mom is still watching.*

Scattered amongst the Potter memoirs were more stories about dragons and others about pirates and girls who loved horses. But Andrew thought pirates were goofy and girls were, well, girls. Nothing interested him until he spotted a thin, white book with simple black lettering. The title read, *The First Solo Transatlantic Flight*. Immediately, Andrew recalled his father and mother telling him they would be crossing the Atlantic Ocean. *Would this book*

*be about what I'm about to do?* Andrew pulled it out and opened it up. *The story of Charles Lindbergh and his airplane, the Spirit of St. Louis*, Andrew read. *I wonder if that's the plane we'll be flying in?* An hour later he carried it onto a much larger plane to Paris.

"Hey Dad, did you know it took Charles Lindbergh 33 hours, 30 minutes and 29.8 seconds to fly from New York to Paris?" Andrew asked his father, whom his mother had absentmindedly allowed him to sit next to.

"Huh-uh," replied his paperback-occupied father, a deft tactician at multitasking casual conversations with his children while enjoying disposable who-dun-its.

"How long will it take us? Mom said seven or eight hours."

"Sounds about right."

"That's a lot faster than the Spirit of St. Louis, but then, this plane is a lot bigger. Charles Lindbergh weighed 170 pounds. How much do you weigh?"

"About the same."

"He looks skinny in this picture," Andrew said as he vainly attempted to divert his father's eyes to the book he'd bought for his son. Comparing the picture to his father's sturdy frame—his mother's words, not his—he reasoned that Lindbergh must have had very heavy bones. "He was born in 1902. When were you born, Dad?"

"After that."

Andrew imagined his father lying in a crib next to Charles, delivered a few minutes after the legendary flyer.

“What about Mom?”

“A few months after me.”

They wouldn’t have been in the hospital at the same time, Andrew concluded.

“His plane was called the Spirit of St. Louis. Where’s St. Louis?”

“South.”

“Near Mexico?”

“Almost.”

Andrew decided to learn to speak Mexican, so when he traveled to St. Louis he could talk to the people there.

“Have you ever been there?”

From across the isle, Andrew’s mother breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing her two men bonding so wonderfully.

Two hours later, Andrew was sitting next to his sister, examining the dinner the stewardess had just delivered. He had asked for a grilled cheese sandwich. He got something that looked like chicken. His mother, who now occupied his former seat, was rubbing his father’s shoulders as she whispered to him, “Relax, dear. We’re almost there.”

It was a dark, moonless night when Andrew and his family flew into Paris, with nothing but a sea of twinkling lights below broadcasting the existence of a city. And just as Lindbergh had done one hundred years prior, they circled the Eiffel Tower before happily reuniting with the earth after 3,600 miles of flight.

As they rode in a taxi toward their new home, quiet and jet-lagged, Katie noticed her brother gazing eagerly out the window.

“What’s got you all hippity-hop?” she asked.

Andrew didn’t hear his sister. His thoughts were 3,600 miles away, but he was content. He knew he would return home someday soon. The greatest pilot of all time would help him. Passing beneath a giant, golden arch, Andrew couldn’t wait to unpack his suitcase and start working on his flight plan home with his best friend, Colonel Charles Lindbergh.