

## Happy Birthday from Helen's Commons

by Alex Rowland (2019)

### **The Pitch**

Players embody citizens of an unknown nation on the brink of war waiting to know whether they and or their loved ones will be drafted to fight. The game is set in a local bar, *Helen's Commons*, where the players gather to watch the regularly reoccurring televised draft. Character's grow individually and collectively as play progresses but plans, dreams and relationships are occasionally pulled asunder when they are called to war based on something as innocuous as the day they were born.

### **Introduction**

It's a big city and finding meaning in the middle of modernity is increasingly difficult – especially during wartime. For some, Helen's Commons was the answer. When the bar was new the neighborhood was still very old. Many generations working-class families born and died in the north end—their homes and business standing for two centuries or more. Today, its southern boundary marks the end of “the good part of town,” and stands in stark contrast to the rapidly changing and industrious neighborhoods beyond it. Helen's Commons is a specter of what the north-end once was but still, it gives shelter to those who carry its spirit.

**Helen's Commons:** Its regulars lovingly refer to it as piece of shit, but god forbid someone else does. It's a small bar that hasn't seen a renovation in decades as evidenced by the wood paneled walls, cigarette worn curtains and bubble televisions. Though you couldn't tell from the street given the condition of the windows, it's covered in vintage signs, both neon and otherwise for cheap domestic beer. Back in the day, Helen made it her top priority to see that regardless of the state of the rest of the bar, the bathrooms were sanitary and tidy. Today, the bathrooms are plastered floor to ceiling with bumper stickers for various unions but remain the cleanest space in the joint. Some of the regulars like, Dino, enjoy scaring the uninitiated away, especially folks from the southside. Dino was once big-fucking-barrel chested construction worker type with one eye. Now he's just fucking fat with one eye. He wears a flag bandana to cover is bald head and isn't afraid to show folks his knife when he's drunk—he's always drunk. Dino's an alright guy. He's in the Helen's family after all and that means something. So are they all, all in the family. Regardless of what is happening outside its doors, the mood is consistently jovial, jocular, loving... in its own way.

**The Past Year:** Your country has been to war in your lifetime, that's not terribly unusual. But from the first news reports this one has felt different... and that suspicion was confirmed when the government announced it was instituting a draft, which has not occurred in your lifetime. They said it was to be a fair system, a lottery based on birthdate and it was to be done every 12 months until the completion of the war. The notion has felt abstract for past few months. A morose electric anxiety has been building since the initial announcement. The talking heads on the radio and television have been speculating non-stop but most folks on the street don't really want to discuss it. It's as if bringing it up at all is enough to jinx themselves and everyone else who shares their birthday. That all changes today as the nation's collective anxiety crescendos – everyone glued to their televisions waiting...

### **Requirements:**

Players: 6-8 + 1 GM

Time: 1.5 hours

Materials:

- A vessel such that small pieces of paper could easily be pulled from it
- Four envelopes
- Printable materials included in the appendix of this document
- Something with which to play music on
  - [Elevator Song](#) by Keaton Henson
  - [Waves](#) by Abby Gundersen

**SETUP**

- Players print and cutout the *player birthday matrix* along the lines
- Evenly distribute those birthdays from the matrix that correspond with those on player’s character sheet into 4 piles, face down (if not playing with 8 players, consult *Draft Setup* chart below).
- Players print and cut the filler matrix along the lines and place 18 dates into each pile.
- Put each of these piles into their own envelope. Mix up the contents.
- Label the envelopes Draft 1, Draft 2, Draft 3, Draft 4
- Players print and cutout the character sheets.

**Draft Setup**

Number of Players	# of Filler Cards Per Envelope	# of Player Cards Draft Cards Per envelope	# of Cards Read Per Draft
6	18	1 in the first 2 envelopes, 2 in the second 2	12
7	18	1 in the first envelope, 2 in every other	12
8	18	2	12

**Character Creation**

Character sheets should be cut up and distributed to each player randomly.

Each character should take 5 minutes to quietly imagine their character’s most memorable birthday. It does not have to be good or bad, just a birthday of theirs that stands out to them as truly marking the occasion. Players should feel free to consult their character sheet and include those people from the “Other Birthdays” section.

After 5 minutes, players should get into pairs (or triads if necessary) and create their in-game relationship—it should be substantial and already established at the beginning of play (e.g., siblings, best friends, romantic partners).

Repeat the previous step but players should make this new relationship thin (e.g., you know this person in passing from your time at the bar.)

Based on their birthday memory, players should take 2 minutes by themselves to create the following:

*Note: If these require collaboration with someone the player has established a relationship with, they may work together*

- A reason you don't want to be drafted
- The reason you came to Helen's to watch the lottery

## PLAY

### The Outline

Play consists of three phases: Play Begins, The Lotter, Time Passes. The game is over after 4 cycles of these phases have been completed.

**Play Begins:** Character's either start in the scene or will enter whenever they choose. This roleplay mostly consists of discussion about the war, the draft, life at large or in later scenes, that has happened in the interim. This is the meat of the scene and provides players an opportunity to bring their character's relationships and feelings to life. During this time the GM(s) should listen carefully to what the players are saying and doing as it will provide useful information for the third section of play. This should last 10-15 minutes, but the GM(s) should move to the third phase of play when they feel the players are ready to move on, or play has become stagnant.

**The Lotter:** The GM stands in front of the group of players and reads the *televised lottery script*. (Regardless of the number of players, the person should draw and read only 12 of the dates from the envelope.) Once the GM says, "Goodnight and God bless," if a player(s) is drafted, they should stand up and tell their birthday story to the group. If someone from a player's *Other Birthday's* section of their character sheet is drafted, that player should stand up and read the selected birthday and say their title or name. Player's who are drafted then become GM's.

**Time passes:** Time passes between scenes. The GM(s) should gather the group and provide a brief summary of the major events of next year for each undrafted player, and the group as a whole. The GM(s) should consider the themes of the game: dreams, relationships and birthdays. Their goal is not to create a devastating or complicated narrative for the players, but rather provide one that facilitates the growth of the character, their dreams and relationships. Importantly, the summaries should center the character's birthdays on that year, using it as a storytelling device. Players who have been drafted have authority over their own story and should share it with the group in this phase of play. Players who have been drafted become GM's and help in the storytelling process, as well as take turns reading the *Televised Lottery Script* at the end of scenes.

At the beginning of play the GM Read the following to the Players:

*When play begins, this space becomes your beloved watering hole on the night of the first draft lottery in decades. Helen's is not exempt from the electric anxiety that has permeated the entirety of the country over the past month – that feeling crescendo's tonight.*

Play begins with all but one player outside of the room. The player whose character sheet indicates they have been going to Helen's for the longest, starts play sitting in the room. In later scenes players can decide for themselves whether they're in the bar when play begins.

### Principles and Rules

Principle - Tone: This is a game set in reality and deals with serious themes—it should be played with the gravity that the subject matter deserves.

Principle - Emergent Story: Let the story develop naturally. Unlike parlor larps, there isn't a pre-determined plot. The fiction of the game is created as it is played. Players attempt to protect your character from harm.

Rule- End of Play: The game has several end conditions, 1) all four scenes have been played, 2) all players have been drafted, 3) all but one player has been drafted.

Principle – About the War: The conflict your nation is entering, and for which people are being drafted to fight has been intentionally left vague. Like all wars, it is incredibly complicated; it has supporters and critics for all the usual reasons, and regardless of the outcome it will have been horrible. It is a war where humans are pitted against humans for the sake of resolving conflicting interests and many, many people will die as a result. These are the only details about the conflict that are important.

Principle – Not About War: This game is about memories, plans, relationships and birthdays and how the latter can change the former forever. This game uses a military draft as a setting, but it is not about war. Prioritize play that treats the war / draft as a catalyst for feelings and other life events, and less like a thing that needs to be fleshed out.

Principle – Draft Details: This draft does not discriminate. Players should assume that anyone whose birthday has been selected will indeed serve the military. These drafts will occur every 12 months depending on the status of the conflict and the military's need for warm bodies.

Rule – Other Birthdays: Located on character sheets, *Other Birthdays* are simply birthdays you remember. Some of the people they are attached to are significant, some are not—birthdays are weird like that. If the relationship attached to a birthday doesn't work for a character, players should feel free to change it to something that does.

Rule – Name Tag: Everyone must wear a nametag with their character's name on it (which can be found on the character sheet) and the pronouns they would like their character to be addressed by.

Rule – Music: There are two songs featured in this game. *The Elevator Song* and *Waves*. The former is used to indicate the transition into the second phase of play. When players hear it, they have about 30 seconds to finish before the lottery begins. The latter is used as background during phase three.

## APPENDICES

### Televised Lottery Script

Play *The Elevator Song* and allow it grab people's attention.

In your best television announcer voice, they should read the following...

*Pursuant to the executive order, the director of selective service is going to establish tonight a random selection, a sequence for induction. For all of you that are selected this evening, as the minister said earlier today, you have the confidence and gratitude and love of your countrymen. We are with you. Eligible citizens with the following birthdates are to report to your local military recruitment center no later than 2 weeks from this date.*

The GM should proceed to pull numbers from the appropriate envelope and read the dates aloud, when you are done say, "Goodnight, and God bless".

### Character Sheets

<p><b>Name:</b> A</p> <p><b>How Long You've Been going to Helens:</b> 6 Years</p> <p><b>Birthday:</b> January 19<sup>th</sup></p> <p><b>Other Birthdays</b></p> <p>Oldest Sister: January 25<sup>th</sup>.</p> <p>Youngest Sister: February 2<sup>nd</sup>.</p> <p>Highschool Friend: April 3<sup>rd</sup></p>	<p><b>Name:</b> B</p> <p><b>How Long You've Been going to Helens:</b> First Timer</p> <p><b>Birthday:</b> April 4<sup>th</sup></p> <p><b>Other Birthdays</b></p> <p>Younger Brother: April 9<sup>th</sup></p> <p>Older Brother: May 18<sup>th</sup></p> <p>Neighbor: November 23<sup>rd</sup></p>	<p><b>Name:</b> D</p> <p><b>How Long You've Been going to Helens:</b> 6 Years</p> <p><b>Birthday:</b> May 25<sup>th</sup></p> <p><b>Other Birthdays</b></p> <p>Son: June 13<sup>th</sup></p> <p>Sibling: May 25<sup>th</sup></p> <p>Best Friend: July 3<sup>rd</sup></p>
<p><b>Name:</b> E</p> <p><b>How Long You've Been going to Helens:</b> 6 Years</p> <p><b>Birthday:</b> July 5<sup>th</sup></p> <p><b>Other Birthdays</b></p> <p>Favorite Coworker: November 21<sup>st</sup></p> <p>Cousin: August 16<sup>th</sup></p> <p>Dad: September 12<sup>th</sup></p>	<p><b>Name:</b> F</p> <p><b>How Long You've Been going to Helens:</b> 6 Years</p> <p><b>Birthday:</b> April 7<sup>th</sup></p> <p><b>Other Birthdays</b></p> <p>Ex-Partner: September 22<sup>nd</sup></p> <p>Youngest Nibling: October 14<sup>th</sup></p> <p>Play Cousin: September 27<sup>th</sup></p>	<p><b>Name:</b> H</p> <p><b>How Long You've Been going to Helens:</b> 6 Years</p> <p><b>Birthday:</b> December 2<sup>nd</sup></p> <p><b>Other Birthdays</b></p> <p>Daughter: December 28<sup>th</sup></p> <p>Youngest Sister: January 4<sup>th</sup></p> <p>Highschool Friend: March 26<sup>th</sup></p>
<p><b>Name:</b> J</p> <p><b>How Long You've Been going to Helens:</b> 6 Years</p> <p><b>Birthday:</b> August 7<sup>th</sup></p> <p><b>Other Birthdays</b></p> <p>Your Mechanic: August 31<sup>st</sup></p> <p>Mom: November 29<sup>th</sup></p>	<p><b>Name:</b> K</p> <p><b>How Long You've Been going to Helens:</b> 6 Years</p> <p><b>Birthday:</b> October 1<sup>st</sup></p> <p><b>Other Birthdays</b></p> <p>Religious Leader: October 13<sup>th</sup></p> <p>Best Friend: February 21<sup>st</sup></p>	

Highschool Friend: May 7 <sup>th</sup>	Union President: May 13 <sup>th</sup>	
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**Player Birthday Matrix**

October 1 <sup>st</sup>	August 7 <sup>th</sup>	July 5 <sup>th</sup>	April 7 <sup>th</sup>
December 2 <sup>nd</sup>	May 25 <sup>th</sup>	April 4 <sup>th</sup>	January 19 <sup>th</sup>

**Filler Matrix**

February 9 <sup>th</sup>	March 4 <sup>th</sup>	March 21 <sup>st</sup>	June 2 <sup>nd</sup>	June 18 <sup>th</sup>	July 21 <sup>st</sup>	December 14 <sup>th</sup>	January 12 <sup>th</sup>
January 15 <sup>th</sup>	January 18 <sup>th</sup>	February 10 <sup>th</sup>	February 15 <sup>th</sup>	February 29 <sup>th</sup>	March 1 <sup>st</sup>	March 10 <sup>th</sup>	March 14 <sup>th</sup>
April 16 <sup>th</sup>	February 2 <sup>nd</sup>	January 25 <sup>th</sup>	January 4 <sup>th</sup>	February 21 <sup>st</sup>	May 18 <sup>th</sup>	May 7 <sup>th</sup>	May 13 <sup>th</sup>
June 13 <sup>th</sup>	July 3 <sup>rd</sup>	August 16 <sup>th</sup>	August 31 <sup>st</sup>	September 12 <sup>th</sup>	September 22 <sup>nd</sup>	September 27 <sup>th</sup>	October 14 <sup>th</sup>
October 13 <sup>th</sup>	November 23 <sup>rd</sup>	November 21 <sup>st</sup>	November 29 <sup>th</sup>	December 28 <sup>th</sup>	April 3 <sup>rd</sup>	May 4 <sup>th</sup>	May 20 <sup>th</sup>
June 5 <sup>th</sup>	June 6 <sup>th</sup>	June 27 <sup>th</sup>	July 13 <sup>th</sup>	July 7 <sup>th</sup>	July 28 <sup>th</sup>	August 8 <sup>th</sup>	August 11 <sup>th</sup>
August 20 <sup>th</sup>	September 8 <sup>th</sup>	September 23 <sup>rd</sup>	September 30 <sup>th</sup>	October 2 <sup>nd</sup>	October 10 <sup>th</sup>	October 21 <sup>st</sup>	October 30 <sup>th</sup>
November 1 <sup>st</sup>	November 10 <sup>th</sup>	November 11 <sup>th</sup>	December 23 <sup>rd</sup>	December 12 <sup>th</sup>	December 16 <sup>th</sup>	January 12 <sup>th</sup>	February 18 <sup>th</sup>
March 21 <sup>st</sup>	April 25 <sup>th</sup>	June 3 <sup>rd</sup>	June 19 <sup>th</sup>	July 4 <sup>th</sup>	August 1 <sup>st</sup>	October 17 <sup>th</sup>	November 17 <sup>th</sup>

**Special Thanks**

My experience playing Jeff Dieterle's game, Wigilia helped give shape to this game's stages of play.

This game was inspired in-part by the podcast, The Memory Palace by Nate DiMeo.