# Spitfire

## Chapter 1

Everything was the same where Caroline Panski lived. All the streets in her neighborhood were the same. The rows upon rows of brick houses were the same, with the same windows and the same marble stoops. It had always been the same, and it always would be the same. There weren't even any trees to break up the monotony. At twelve years old, Caroline was old enough to know that as long as she was stuck in her boring Highlandtown neighborhood in boring old Baltimore, nothing would ever change. And, therefore, nothing would ever be any fun.

Inside the modest Panski home on South Clinton Street, Caroline sat in the cramped space afforded by the bow window and stared at the steady diet of rain and sleet outside. *If only it would snow*, she thought. Behind her, a clamor of mundane domestic noises competed with the radio: "It's twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit in Baltimore on this, the second day of December, 1952. Rain continues." There followed a blast of tinny music, followed by a deep, serious voice: "Now, Edward R. Murrow and the voices of President Harry S. Truman, Bernard F. Baruch, Senator Robert Taft, General George C. Marshall, Governor Earl Warren, and more than forty other men and women in this evening's performance of *Hear it Now* presented tonight, and every week, at this time. Later, an editorial: Children in Asia are dying of starvation and the bestselling books in America are how to get thin. But first, we go to the cold battlefields of Korea, where our brave American fighting men—"

Always on alert for news from Korea, Caroline tried to block out everything but the voice on the radio. But like usual, Eloise Panski switched off the radio and called out to her daughter from the kitchen.

"Caroline? Have you completed your studies?"

“Mm-hmm.”

Mrs. Panski, moving with a slight limp, appeared in the doorway and scrutinized Caroline. “You can’t go out in this mess again,” she said.

Caroline continued staring out the window, watching as two boys engaged in some rough horseplay out on the sidewalk as they passed. “I know.”

“Not while it’s sleeting.”

Mrs. Panski regarded her daughter and uttered a slight sigh of exasperation. “Supper in one hour,” she said before retreating to the kitchen where the symphony of clanging pots and pans resumed.

Beautiful, their decrepit miniature schnauzer, padded up to Caroline and nudged her leg. Caroline reached down and reflexively scratched Beautiful behind the ear. As she stared out the window, what had begun as a barely perceptible change slowly became visibly noticeable: the sleet was turning to fat snowflakes. Caroline’s eyes brightened. She gave Beautiful one last pat on the head and tore away, sending the dog scurrying for cover under a nearby chair.

Caroline hit the narrow stairs running, squeezing past her seven-year-old-brother along the way.

“Hey! Watch it!” Sam yelled.

She ignored him and bounded into her tiny bedroom. She reached into her closet and pulled out a pair of ice skates. Next to the closet, a hockey stick leaned against the wall. She grabbed this, too, and started to run out of her room. But she paused, looking at the picture of a handsome man in an Army uniform that rested on her dresser. She smiled at it, then took off again, skates tied together and flung over her shoulder, down the stairs, through the front door, and into the snow.

It was coming down harder now, the snowflakes unrelenting, sticking to everything in sight. With little regard for the slippery conditions, Caroline barreled through the snow, tore through an alley, and emerged onto an abandoned lot. Surrounded on all sides by crowded rows of dilapidated houses, like cracked teeth chattering in the freezing weather, sat a large semicircle of frozen water, a temporary pond in a world of glass and brick and concrete.

Caroline plopped down into the snow, pulled off her boots, and laced up her skates. She raced out onto the ice and executed a perfect spin. She skated and skated, warming herself up. Not without a few stumbles but with a certain beauty and competence, as if on the edge of skating greatness. The coiled up tension of her athleticism bubbled forward, propelling her from one end of the pond to the other, legs pumping, making quick work of the rough uneven surface.

She stopped, set her sights on the far end of the pond, and raced in that direction as quickly as she could, her breath trailing behind in little puffs and plumes. Racing, skating, racing . . . until she tripped over a rock and sprawled headfirst onto the ice with an *oomph!* Caroline pushed herself up, wiped the ice crystals from her coat, and ran her mitten over her chin. She looked at her mitten and frowned at the smeared droplets of blood.

She scowled at the offending rock before straightening and speeding over to where she'd left her hockey stick by her boots. She came to an abrupt stop, spraying ice and snow on her boots, grabbed the stick, and took off back across the ice. Her hands deftly cradled the stick, switching back and forth, letting it slide and bump over the icy surface until she reached the rock. Without breaking stride, she made contact and pushed the rock along the ice, racing and pushing, moving her way across the pond until she slowed, veered to the right, pushed the rock ahead, and then wound up and let loose a mean slapshot toward the crude net someone had set up

to approximate a hockey goal. The rock skipped off the ice, shuttling through a hole in the netting and slamming into the rusted hood of an abandoned car.

"Goal!" Caroline raised her stick high in triumph. She smiled up at the cartoon figure imprinted on the wood and then brought it to her lips. This was as close as she could get to her father. He'd given her the stick years earlier. He knew how much it meant to her. And now, it was like he was here, watching her, encouraging her, skating alongside her instead fighting on some frozen battlefield on the other side of the world.

* * *

Caroline shut the door behind her and stomped the snow off her boots. She looked up when she felt her mother staring at her from the kitchen doorway.

"Supper's ready. I've been calling."

Caroline, red cheeked and still breathing hard, brushed a strand of wet hair out of her eyes. "It stopped sleeting. It's just snow."

"I know, but I told you I don't like you running off like that without telling me. Now get out of those wet things and go get cleaned up."

Caroline shed her wet coat and pants, the cuffs of which were caked with snow, and dropped them on the rug. Then she plucked up her skates and stick and ran up the stairs, twirling around the banister and skipping into her bedroom. She was a swirl of activity, tossing her skates and her stick in the corner near her closet, changing into dry clothes, and running a brush through her wet hair. But then she stopped and moved to her dresser. She picked up the picture of her father in his army uniform and rubbed her fingers across it.

"Caroline!"

"Coming."

Caroline took the stairs two at a time and slid into her seat at the table where her mother and brother already sat with hands folded in their laps. Mrs. Panski lowered her head. “We give thanks for these our gifts—” Sam looked up and stuck his tongue out at his sister. Caroline lifted a hunk of mashed potatoes in her fingers and threatened to fire it at her brother. “—through the bounty of Christ our Lord.”

Caroline sucked the potatoes from her fingers and swallowed hard before her mother looked up.

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

They made the sign of the cross and then Caroline dug in with unrestrained vigor.

“Caroline, really!” Mrs. Panski protested, her eyes wide in horror. “A lady should have manners.”

Caroline shot a sideways glance at Sam as he shoveled food into his mouth without a care in the world. But she didn’t say anything. It wouldn’t do any good anyway. Boys were boys. Girls were girls. And girls should have manners.

After dinner, Caroline retreated to her bedroom, thankful for the millionth time that she no longer had to share a room with Sam. Thankful that her dad had understood how important it was for her to have her own space. She remembered when he’d first suggested that he clear out his storeroom as a present for her tenth birthday. “There’s too much junk in here anyway,” he’d said. “Time for you to have your own room.”

He’d sorted through old boxes, carted stuff to the basement, gifted a few things to neighbors, and eventually ended up with two boxes of worthless stuff that he and Caroline had hauled off to the dump. First they’d taken the Roland Park trolley line and then the public bus

from there all the way past Towson and into the suburban hinterlands north of Timonium, a scarred landscape of ex-farmland with patterns of foundations for new subdivisions. She could still recall the look on her father's face, the way he watched as the bus traveled north along York Road, passing the construction workers spreading the tentacles of civilization in the age of the automobile, an age of mobility. *Perhaps someday*, his face seemed to say.

She missed him, terribly. She was just like him—at least that's what everyone said. Not only did she look like him—with the same long dark eyelashes atop icy blue eyes—but they shared a certain outlook on the world as well, a way of willfully failing to understand things that inconvenienced them. It was this same attribute that allowed her to not worry endlessly about him. When she did think about him, it hurt too much. Baltimore was cold, but Korea, she understood, was worse.

She knew better than to consult her geography textbook again; she'd made that mistake once. *Roddy's Elementary Geography* was an old textbook, many of the maps out of date, but her class at school still used it. When she looked up the section with Korea in it, she learned very little. But this was, apparently, by design; as the book said: "Like China, Korea has had little to do with foreign nations and people. It is often called the 'Hermit Nation'." This sense of mystery produced a foreboding in Caroline. Just what kind of a place had he been sent to? It was difficult to find out. The entry went on to say that, "The people resemble the Chinese." That was a terrifying prospect, for, according to *Roddy's*, "The Chinese have many curious customs and ideas. The higher classes bandage the feet of their girls so as to prevent growth. They think small feet very beautiful, even though the feet are terribly deformed and can hardly be used for walking."

She pictured an army of little girls and women hobbling along on tiny club feet. Did her dad see women like that and think longingly of his own girl, back home in Baltimore, stuffing her intact and growing feet into hockey skates? Or did the Koreans even do this? They "resembled" the Chinese, but what did that mean exactly? It was all so confusing.

Better not to think about it. Better to picture him with some of the comforts of home. Better to imagine him instead getting warmed by a fire or, even better, inside a building, drinking coffee and laughing with his fellow soldiers. Yes, that's how she thought of him. It wasn't so hard to do when she forced herself. And so with the occasional inevitable lapse and accompanying tears, she more or less went through her days keeping her father and Korea and war locked away in the recesses of her thoughts.

Caroline turned toward the window and peered outside. The snow continued to fall, but lighter now. She slid open her window, her breath pluming in front of her, and twisted her body, straining, until, in the far distance, she could see the pond. There, a dozen boys played hockey, barely lit by ambient gaslight. Even at this distance, she could tell they were skilled players, executing difficult moves, and firing the puck with great speed and force. She could almost feel her fingers tighten around her stick. Oh, how she wished she was on the ice now!

Hearing someone coming, Caroline quickly closed the window and threw herself onto her bed just before her mother entered.

"Lights out," she said. She looked around, puzzling out something, her brow furrowed. "Why is it so cold in here?"

"But it's only 8:30," Caroline protested.

"Be grateful you have a roof over your head and food to eat. Did you hear the program about the starving Asian boys and girls?"

"Is that what Daddy is doing there? Helping those boys and girls get food?"

Mrs. Panski got her look again. "Can we talk about this another time?"

"But that's what you always say."

"Goodnight, Caroline."

"Mama?"

"Yes, Caroline?"

"Do little girls in Korea have to have their feet bandaged?"

"What do you mean?"

"So that their feet are really small? Like the Chinese?"

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about." Mrs. Panski snapped off the lights. "Good night."

"Good night, Mama."

Caroline waited a moment and then returned to the window. Without opening it and leaning out, she could only see a small part of the pond, but she knew the boys were still there. She watched for a few minutes and saw their dark, hulking shadows slide across the ice and then disappear again. Then she turned away and slipped into bed.

**Chapter 2**

Bright sunlight greeted Caroline as she crawled out from under her blankets. She looked outside, at a world covered in white, and squinted. A man swept snow from the windshield of his car; a lonely fruit seller prodded his horse, laden with snow bells and pulling an empty cart along the street; a bus whooshed past, washing the world in a fine white spray.

Caroline could hear the sounds of breakfast being prepared downstairs and then the familiar call: “Caroline, get dressed for school and come down to eat. You’re late.”

She raced through her breakfast and then headed out. On the sidewalk stood her friend Alma. “Come on,” Alma said. “Mustn’t keep Bee waiting. You know how she gets.”

The two girls hurried along the sidewalk and were soon joined two more friends, Beatrice and Genevieve. Each of the girls wore essentially the same uniform, allowing only for a few variations: knee-length skirts, white socks pulled up to their knees, snow boots, heavy winter coats with fur-lined collars, and knitted caps.

Beatrice piped up: “What took you so long?”

“Sorry,” Caroline said as the four girls resumed their march along the sidewalk, kicking at shoveled snow mounds along the way.

“I hope Miss Bloom is sick today,” Alma said. “Or fell in the snow and can’t get up.”

Genevieve shuddered. “I don’t think witches can get sick.”

“That’s mean.” Caroline tsked at her friends.

“Caroline gave Miss Bloom an apple on the first day,” Genevieve added, employing a sing-song voice which she used frequently.

“Too bad it wasn’t poisoned,” Beatrice added.

Caroline rolled her eyes.

“Little Caroline, always defending Miss Bloom. Face the facts, Caroline, the woman is undoubtedly and indisputably a witch.”

“Un-what?” Alma asked.

Genevieve rolled her eyes. “Try reading some books, Alma.”

“Who needs books when you have a television?”

Caroline winced. “Pleeeeeeze tell me we don’t have to listen to you go on about that television again.”

“Last night, we watched Groucho Marx and *Your Show of Shows*.”

At the crossing, the girls kept up their chatter, looking both ways for cars and buses. As Caroline looked, she craned her head and could see, through an alley, the edge of the frozen hockey pond. A couple of geese waddled across the surface, taking small ungainly leaps into the air and coming to rest on top of the rusted automobile where Caroline had earlier sent her rock puck.

“Caroline!”

When Caroline looked up, she saw Beatrice, hands on her hips, staring at her in exasperation. The girls were already on the sidewalk and a car sat waiting patiently in the middle of the road for Caroline to join them. She waved at the driver and hurried across the street as a stream of students shuffled into school.

* * *

Miss Bloom moved to the blackboard, where a map of China and the Korean peninsula were displayed. She was a portly, no-nonsense woman in her late fifties who wore her hair pulled into a severe bun and sported cat eye glasses attached to a chain around her neck.

“This is the line where our brave American men are fighting the fascist, communist forces of Mousy Tongue,” she said. “Class, what is the difference between Americans and Communists?”

Caroline stared out the window and wondered if she’d be able to sneak over to the pond before dinner as Anthony, a humorless kid with brilliantined hair, waved his hand in the air. “The communists are godless, ma’am.”

“Very good, Anthony. And we will win in Korea, just as we won on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific. Because God is on the side of the United States of America.”

Caroline hoped she wouldn’t have too much homework. Her mother wouldn’t let her skate if she didn’t get her work done first.

“Miss Panski!” Miss Bloom bellowed.

Caroline snapped to attention. “Yes, ma’am?”

“I was reminding the class that your brave father, a God-fearing man I am certain, is on the cold battlefields of Korea. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We owe a debt of gratitude to soldiers like your father. It’s because of men like him that we can enjoy the freedoms we have here today. Now let’s practice our air raid drill.”

The students threw their books and papers into their desks. A siren sounded, and they all dropped to the floor and scurried under their desks. Alma and Genevieve had an unobstructed view of one another. They stuck out their tongues and made silly faces, pausing only when Miss Bloom’s thick, stockinged legs waddled past.

Caroline didn’t see them. Instead, she stared at the ground. While her father was never too far from her thoughts, and she knew Miss Bloom’s meant well, she was sorry that her teacher had talked about him to the whole class. It brought back that old familiar feeling deep in the pit of her stomach, the one that threatened to make her sick with worry. She hated it.

One tear weaved its way down her cheek. It traced a path along the cut she still had visible on her chin. She quickly wiped it away.

When the school bell rang at the end of the day, the children burst from the front doors. The boys immediately made for the snow piles. They grabbed handfuls of snow and threw them at one another as the girls dodged and ran as quickly as they could out of the line of fire.

Once clear and on the shoveled sidewalk, Caroline, Alma, Beatrice, and Genevieve walked toward home together. As they passed the high school, they noticed a small crowd milling around, looking agitated. One man held a sign that read, “Race Mixing is Communism”. Another sign read, “Cursed is the Man who Integrates,” and a woman in a bright blue coat and matching hat waved a sign with big block letters that read, “Go Back to Africa.”

Caroline stopped and turned to her friends. “I wonder what’s going on.”

“I think it’s because we’re going to have Negroes in our school,” Alma said. “They call it ‘integer’ or something.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

Alma shrugged. “My parents. They thought I was in bed, but I was sitting at the top of the stairs so I could hear what they were talking about. My dad was pretty upset.”

“Upset about what?”

“We’ll, he’s against it.” Alma shook her fist in the air and scrunched her face up to imitate her father. “Those niggers will come to our schools over my dead body. They got their own schools. Why the heck they have to come to ours?’ With a laugh, she let her fist drop. “Course, he didn’t say ‘heck’.”

Caroline shook her head. “I don’t see what the big deal is. Negroes in school. So what?”

“They’re just different from us, is all.”

Beatrice stared at the signs for a moment and then turned to Alma. “Frankly, I think your parents are right. Why do they need to come to our schools when they have their own?”

"'All men are created equal', Genevieve said and started walking, leading the group past the protesters. "I read that somewhere."

"But Negroes aren't as smart as white people. How will they keep up in class?"

"That's a bunch of hogwash," Genevieve protested. "Some people say Jews are greedy, and that's stupid, too. Mr. Rosenbaum gives me free treats every time me and my mom go in his grocery store."

Alma kicked at a pile of snow. "All I know is that they're really funny. That Ethel Waters in Beulah. 'Queen of the Kitchen' is great. And Amos and Andy."

"But those people aren't even real," Genevieve said.

"On the television show they are," Alma protested.

Genevieve rolled her eyes. "Again with the television."

"You're just jealous you don't have one," Beatrice chimed in.

"I can't deny that," Genevieve said with a laugh.

"Well, I just hope none of them try to come to *our* school." Beatrice pulled her hat down over her ears as the girls continued on until they reached the place where Beatrice and Genevieve would head one direction and Alma and Caroline would head another.

"Have fun at piano practice," Alma said before the group split up.

"Ick," Genevieve replied. "I've barely practiced all week."

"Have a stupendous time doing whatever you two do on Tuesday afternoons," Beatrice said.

"We will," Alma said with a nod. "Indi-unda-sputitable."

Beatrice shook her head sadly. "Really, Alma. A book. Try it sometime."

"Not tonight. Webster Webfoot's on—he's my favorite."

And with that, the pairs said goodbye and went their separate ways.

"You really think we'll have Negroes in our school someday?" Caroline asked after they they'd turned a corner.

Alma shrugged. "Beats me."

"Well, like I said, I just don't see the big deal. They have a right to education, too."

Alma shrugged. "Well, this is me," she said. Alma skipped up the steps of a rowhouse and disappeared inside with a wave, leaving Caroline to continue on her way until she reached her own house.

"I'm home!" she hollered when she stepped inside. A few moments later, Sam appeared, twirling a pinwheel.

"Mom's next door, at the Knudsens."

Caroline absorbed this information for a beat and then raced upstairs. She came bounding back moments later, skates over her shoulder and hockey stick in hand, and bolted toward the front door.

"Hey! Mom said you're supposed to help me with my school work," Sam yelled.

Caroline was half out the door, but managed to declare, "Do it yourself," before she sprinted outside, where she turned left. When she came to the Knudsen's, a few doors down, she crouched low and skirted past the front stoop, trying to keep from being spotted. As soon as she passed, she took off again, peeling off at the first alley.

At the pond, a dozen or so young boys had already started a game. They were skating roughly, playing with abandon as hip checks sent a few of them teetering across the ice. A few high sticks threatened teeth, only a few of which were permanent.

Caroline emerged from the alley. She stopped short when she saw the boys. But then she inhaled deeply, gathering her resolve. Slowly, she made her way over. The boys continued playing—until one by one they noticed her. They stopped, each holding his stick across his knees. It had the feel of a showdown: twelve boys on one side, Caroline on the other, each waiting for the other to do something. Finally, one boy skated forward.

"You lost? What do you want?"

Caroline didn't answer.

Another boy spoke up. "You dumb or somethin'?"

A third kid, gangly and awkward even without ice skates, added, "Look, guys: It's Sonja Henie," cracking himself up.

The other boys laughed, too. Gangly, encouraged now by the others, continued, "This ain't Rockefeller Center, sweetheart."

"You can't figure skate today. We got the ice. You can go over to Carlin's, little girl."

"Or Patterson Park—that's where girls skate."

Caroline stood her ground. "I don't want to figure skate," she said. "I want to play hockey."

The boys burst out laughing, as if this was the most hysterical thing they'd ever heard.

"Girls figure skate," the first boy snorted. "Boys play hockey. Now get outta here. Go on over to Patterson Park and let us get back to our game."

"But they don't let you play hockey in Patterson Park," Caroline said.

This prompted more laughter. "Well, we're not gonna let you play hockey here, either!" one of the boys shouted. Caroline stared at them for a moment longer, but they were already

skating away, returning to the chaos of their game. Her fingers gripped her stick as she turned and walked away, eyes burning.

The boys' mention of Carlin's especially stung because that had been where her father first took her out on the ice. It was a destination like no other, and she remembered her parents talking about it when she was little, like it was some mythical wonderland, a crazy place where anything could happen. Days at Carlin's constituted her father's earliest memories, and he often told Caroline and Sam about those zany times, when pole-sitting, for some reason, was all the rage. Back in '29, when the famous "Shipwreck" Kelly came to Carlin's and sat on top of a platform on a little pole for forty-five days and nights. He even slept up there, and bathed, too, using wet rags. "Well, how did he go to the bathroom?" Sam asked and Mrs. Panski shushed him for his interest in such things, despite the fact that both Caroline and Mrs. Panski herself giggled at the question.

"He was allowed five minutes off the pole every day," Mr. Panski answered.

"So he had to hurry," Sam said.

Again, giggles all around.

"It was a whole craze. After Shipwreck Kelly was here, kids all over the city started climbing into trees and wouldn't come down."

"Did you do that, Daddy?"

"Shoot. Your granddaddy would have skinned me alive if I tried that."

"But there was that one kid—" Mrs. Panski added.

"A.C. Forman. He went up for ten days. Even the mayor came and stood below the pole, passing out business cards."

Caroline would watch wordlessly as they reminisced, enthralled by her parents' memories, when they lived an unfettered life, a time before she and Sam, a time when they first fell in love. And they were in love still. Caroline could tell when they'd both go on about Carlin's. Caroline would just watch them, smiling an unembarrassed smile as her mother and father laughed uncontrollably, stopping to touch one another on the hand, her dad having trouble getting through the famous referee story while her mom wiped away tears of mirth. Upon Caroline and Sam's prompting, her dad would tell it again and again as if it was the first, and not the twentieth, time he'd told it. The one about old Ed Brockman—he was the referee—when his trousers split right down the middle. A wrestling match between Ray Steele and George Zaharias. "He was married to the great athlete Babe Didrikson," Mrs. Panski put in. "Yes, yes, the Babe's husband. And there they were, grappling with each other, and old Brockman's trousers . . . right down the middle."

Mr. Panski got up, bowed his legs, demonstrating, to Caroline's absolute delight. "Someone in the audience threw a pair of lavender bloomers . . ." Here, Caroline's parents absolutely lost it, falling all over each other with laughter. "And Brockman put them on. The sight of that man throwing himself between the wrestlers wearing those bloomers. I'll never forget it." They could hardly breathe by this time in the story. "Steele and Zaharias themselves were laughing so hard they could hardly stand up." Her parents eventually got control of themselves, sighing in remembrance of being young and in love.

Yes, Carlin's. First it was just stories. But then an actual visit. The wonderful build up, in late winter or early spring, the tension rising for a late summer present before Caroline started school in the fall. When she finally got to actually go, she just couldn't believe it. From the moment she arrived and she saw the twin towers flanking the entrance, she realized that even in

her wild imaginings she had underestimated its grandeur, and these imaginings had derived from her father's breathless remembrance of the first time he'd been there, as a little tike in the 1920's, when he saw Shipwreck Kelly and all that. In fact, he still held on to a souvenir of that time, a small poster he kept rolled up in a box in the basement. He'd shown it to her, its promise of "Continuous Dancing" to the music of the "Famous Louisiana Five and Mata's Tropical Marimba Band" in addition to the "Colossal Midway," the "Tokio Gardens," "wonderful exhibitions in the magnificent Ice Palace," and, in big bold letters that seemed to burst forth from the page: "Stupendous Display of Gorgeous Fireworks."

The three of them had gone together, before Sam was even born, and so Caroline had both of her parents all to herself. She rode the airplane ride, watching the blur of Park Heights Avenue zip by, watching her mother and father's beaming faces flash by as she swirled round and round. She rode the teacups also, giggling every time she whipped in a little circle.

Her father showed his prowess at the rifle range, hitting every swinging target and presenting Caroline with a stuffed teddy bear for his marksmanship. "Fine work, sir," the attendant told him as he handed the bear to Caroline. She took it in her hands, squeezed it, and clutched it to her side virtually nonstop. For years afterward, it enjoyed a prominent spot at the foot of her bed.

There were the swinging chairs which made her scared, nauseous, and brought on a torrent of tears, something ultimately salved by an ice cream cone. In the distance loomed the gargantuan roller coaster, of which they steered clear. But the big draw seemed to be roller skating. All around town you could see posters exhorting you to "make a date to roller skate at Carlin's." By the time the day ended, Caroline was in her father's arms, desperately trying to keep her eyes open as she watched with a mixture of fascination and envy a line of boisterous

teenagers heading toward the coliseum for an all-night dance contest. The last she could remember seeing was a beautiful young woman, probably seventeen or so, wearing a long billowy skirt and holding a pair of roller skates, entering the park just as the Panskis were leaving. The excitement of that: to be just starting your evening as theirs was ending. She couldn't wait to grow up, to be out late, to do whatever she wanted to do. It was, up to that point, the most thrilling day of her young life.

But they didn't go back to Carlin's for a long, long time after. Her mother told her they didn't have the extra money, especially after Sam arrived. Yet one more reason to loathe her brother. In fact, Mrs. Panski told her in no uncertain terms, after Caroline had asked for probably the tenth time if they could go back, she better stop asking because it wasn't fair to Sam to have to hear about an event that he did not partake in and that he couldn't experience or enjoy now.

And then the miracle happened: Mrs. Panski opened her loaf of White's Big Tip-Top Bread to find two free tickets "for the LEADING AMUSEMENTS at Carlin's Liberty Heights Park." Then things went from lucky to downright miraculous: Mr. Panski came home that very evening clutching two tickets to Carlin's he'd won at a raffle at work. So the family, never giving one thought to returning to Carlin's when they woke that morning, had four tickets by sundown.

It was a different place when they returned, but no less exhilarating. Still billed as "Clean Fun for the Entire Family," the roller coaster and teacups and swings were still there, but there were new rides, too. There were also circus acts, live bands, even operas. That, and ice skating. Caroline found it a bit odd why her mother didn't skate with them but rather sat outside the rink watching Caroline and her dad. Perhaps Sam needed attending to, but Caroline didn't ask. She was too busy holding on to her father's fingers as he led her onto the ice. He wasn't terribly

steady himself out there, but he knew enough to keep himself upright and to act as support for her as she took small chopping steps, clutching on to his forearms and elbows when she threatened to spill. He held on to her no less tightly and no less securely than those moments when he'd come home from work and she'd meet him out on the sidewalk, hopping down the stoop and flinging herself into the air, knowing he'd catch her, that he would never let her fall.

There was a winter carnival going on with top flight ice skaters performing. Caroline enjoyed this, but she was absolutely enthralled with the next event, a hockey game between the Baltimore Clippers and the Cleveland Knights of the Eastern Amateur Hockey League. Sam was yawning and whining by the end of the first period and the Panskis lasted only until the middle of the second period, but Caroline's obvious disappointment over leaving was pacified when her dad, sucker for his crestfallen daughter, promised they'd come back, just the two of them, to see another game one day soon.

True to his word, and after a few extra overtime shifts, he took Caroline to a game between the Clippers and the Atlantic City Seagulls. The whole atmosphere was electric—hundreds of fans in their seats, screaming and spilling their beer; banners hanging from the ceiling proclaiming the league champion Orioles teams of 1934, 1936, and 1940. Her dad told her that the Orioles had folded but that the Clippers were the new team now, and "they'll win the championship this year. You can bet on that." And sure enough they did, breaking the Boston Olympics' streak of four straight titles.

But all of that paled in comparison to what happened after the game, a 6-2 Clippers victory. As part of a promotion, all kids under fourteen were allowed on the ice. The players showed them how to hold a stick and how to shoot a puck. One of the Clippers, a 6'4 bruiser missing four of his teeth, handed Caroline his stick. She could hardly lift it, but he positioned

himself behind her, helped her wheel it back, and wind up. Together, they let fly a spinning beauty that saucered into the upper right corner of the goal. That had been special enough. But the evening wasn't done. Mr. Panski had another surprise.

Giddy and beaming, he tapped Caroline's shoulder as they were leaving the rink, crooked a finger, and beckoned Caroline to follow him. He went to a kiosk selling Clippers gear and asked the attendant, a pimply high school kid, for one of the replica sticks. It cost a buck fifty, nearly as much as the two game tickets themselves. He reached in his pocket, slapped down two dollars, and collected two quarters and the stick. It was a pretty cheap stick, but it was emblazoned with the snappy Clippers logo: a grizzled sea captain, fully bearded and in fisherman's togs, with requisite cap and buttoned woolen jacket, on skates with a stick in his hand, bursting through an anchor and rope.

Mr. Panski may as well have handed his daughter the Shroud of Turin for the look on Caroline's face. She ran her fingers over the varnished wood, lingering over the slight curve at the widened bottom. She put it on the ground and let it slide across the tiled floor. Then she wound back, taking a few practice swings, threatening her father's shins in the process. "Thank you, Daddy," she whispered.

He kissed Caroline's head. "Our little secret, okay?" he said, winking at her.

She nodded. "Wait," she said. "How can I hide this?"

"Who said anything about hiding? You can show it to your mother. But we say it was a giveaway, part of a promotion. She's liable to kill me if you tell her I paid for it. Now, I don't like lying to your mother, but sometimes—"

"I understand."

***

Why couldn't these stupid boys at the pond be like her dad, or that player from the Clippers? Why did they have to be so rotten? Why did they remind her of Carlin's, of the place now too painful to return to without her dad?

When she got back home, her mom was there to meet her, and she was angry. "Where were you?"

"I had to return a school book to Alma."

Mrs. Panski scrutinized her daughter. "Why do you have your skates and stick with you?"

Caroline paused; she could feel the blood rushing to her cheeks. Lying was not something that came easily to her. "Alma wanted to see them. She's thinking of taking up skating so she can play with me."

"You were supposed to be helping your brother."

"He can help himself."

"Caroline! I asked for your help. I expect to receive it."

"Yes, ma'am," Caroline muttered.

"What's the matter with you? You look like someone's stolen your heart."

Caroline considered telling her mother what happened, but thought better of it. She'd have to reveal that she'd already lied and, besides, how would her mother ever understand anyway? There was no one in the world, she figured, who could really understand. Besides her dad, that is. But he was on the other side of the world.

She felt a burn coming to her eyes and throat, but she managed to swallow it all back. "Nothing's wrong," she whispered.

Caroline trudged up the stairs, heavy-footed. She closed herself in her room, taking the photograph of her father, plopping herself down on her bed, and cradling it to her chest. Small

tears leaked from her eyes and trailed down into her hair. It wasn't so long ago that he sat just here, at the very end of her bed, his hands tight, his fingers interlocked and held between his knees, as he tried his best to explain to her why he was heading off to war.

She could tell he was having trouble. The way he kept stopping his sentences, starting them over and over again, searching for the perfect words to say to her, to fully explain.

"There are communists, you see, and they . . ."

"What are communists?"

"Communists are really bad people. They don't believe in God, you see, and . . ."

"But you told me you don't believe in God."

"Well, now, that's not exactly what I said. What I said was that I don't believe in organized religion, which isn't the same thing. And in any case, you know your mother doesn't like it when we talk about that, and so, anyway . . . what were we talking about?"

"Communists."

"Yes, communists. You see, they starve their own people. They don't believe in freedom or democracy. They're bad people. And we're locked in a fight with them over who is going to control the world. Well, no, that's not it. You see, they want to control the world. We want to make it safe for freedom. For democracy. So that everyone around the world can have the same opportunities that you have here. In communist countries, well, people don't get to do what they want to do. Do you understand that?"

"I guess I do. You mean like I want to play hockey, but kids in communist countries don't get to."

“Well, it’s sort of like that. I mean, you can skate, hit around some pucks, sure. But when you get older, it’s time to put that silly stuff aside, become some fine fellow’s wife and then become some lucky kid’s mother. Everything frivolous comes to an end.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means you’ll understand it better when you’re a bit older.”

“I hate when you and Mama say that.”

Her father smiled, tousled her hair, and continued. “Part of what it means to be an American is that sometimes you have to sacrifice for other people. People less fortunate. So, you see, sometimes men like me have to go to faraway places to help make the world safer not only for children there but for those just like you, here at home.”

“Genevieve’s father isn’t going to the war because he has children. She said that married men with children don’t have to go to the war.”

“Well, that’s true. But you see, if I go and serve, it’ll be good for our family. It’ll provide some stability. I don’t know if I’ll always have the job I have now or even if the plant will always be there. But I’ll always have a place in the American military. It’s not going anywhere.”

Caroline frowned. “But you’re going somewhere.”

“It’ll be okay, sweetheart. I promise. I’ll go for one year, maybe even less if the war ends before then. It’ll go quicker than you think. And then I’ll be back home.”

“And we’ll have a parade?”

“Maybe. Maybe we’ll have a parade. But you know what?”

“What?”

“I don’t need a parade. Do you know what I need?”

“No.”

"Just this."

He reached down as if he was about to hug her, and so Caroline lifted her arms. But he stuck his pointed fingers in her armpits instead and tickled her until she couldn't breathe and begged him to stop, even though she was laughing and smiling. He always knew how to make her laugh. And how to make her smile.

The photograph of her dad slipped from Caroline's fingers. And there it rested, against her side, as she nodded off into an exhausted sleep. But just as quickly, she snapped her head back up, determined to stay awake. She knew that thinking too much about her father just before she went to sleep was a bad idea, that it often induced the dreams. Sometimes they weren't full dreams, with beginnings, middles, and ends. Rather they were just flashes, images here and there, products of an overheated imagination. Other times, the dreams were cobbled together from snatches of radio reports she'd heard and from her father's letters to her mom.

Caroline and Sam received their own letters about once a month, but they were full of questions about what they were doing, how school was going, were they keeping up with their studies, what new things were happening in Baltimore. Caroline dutifully wrote back and answered these questions, but she also asked a bunch of questions of her own. She wanted to know what life was *really* like over there. But he never seemed to answer, except to say that the soldiers didn't do much, just sat around mostly, talking to one another and trying to stay warm. Caroline suspected that maybe he wrote about these things in the letters to her mother, and maybe this was why Caroline was not allowed to read them.

But one time she found one of the letters and read as much of it as she could before she heard her mom coming and had to throw it back on the dresser in her mother's bedroom, where she knew she shouldn't have been snooping in the first place. She managed to read:

I spend a lot of time in my foxhole, just scanning the horizon, waiting for the enemy. But honestly the biggest enemy is boredom. You can only get so much mileage out of those crazy signs the Chinese army left behind before we routed them out. Some examples (for your reading pleasure): "Wait no longer. Hasten to take active measure for peace," "Frontline friendship party was to bring about the positive action for peace," "Think that you don't strive for peace will result in death!" Isn't that bizarre, Eloise? Really, nothing happens (which I suppose is a good thing). Though the C.O.s are always warning us – "Can happen any minute," they say. "Chinese have fighter jets," they remind us. The younger guys say, "Bring it on." Out of earshot, of course. I've written to you about Lundeberg and Wysocki, yes? They're my closest mates. Lundeberg is the sweetest guy. Would give you the shirt off his back. One thing, though, kind of drives me nuts: he repeats himself. Man, does he repeat himself. Probably ten times he's told me about his basic training in Baltimore. All about Camp Holabird and Tank Hill. Tells me again how much he loved the Bay and seeing the views over the hills toward Canton and into the Patapsco. You know this, my dear: even with weak binoculars, you can see every brick on Fort McHenry. It is true, Eloise, it is a beautiful place. And I miss it. When Lundeberg gets to talking about it, I do have to admit it: I smile, tell him, indeed, Baltimore is the "Land of Pleasant Living." But sometimes, well, I'll admit this, too: Sometimes it just hurts far too much to hear. You know? Gets me thinking of the day I left. Of course I don't have the heart to tell him to shut his mouth. Funny, all Lundeberg's yapping is quite the contrast to the new kid, just shipped in from New Mexico. Name's Tyler. Seems a nice kid. I'll show him the ropes—

She didn't understand the bits about the Chinese; they were fighting in Korea, weren't they? It was all very confusing. She wanted to read more, but the next time she tried to find the letter, it was gone. Her heart ached to hear that he hurt too much when he thought of home, and she wondered if maybe she should stop writing him letters, to help him not think so much of home. But that would give *her* a deep hurt to not to do that. A different kind of hurt than the one she carried around every day, missing him. She remembered him once telling her about different kinds of pain, the pain of thinking too much, how it injured you, and in different ways at different times: "The way you sometimes rub a cut or bruise, the way the pain makes you feel alive, the way you can mark the healing by the degree of pain—perhaps a little less each time . . ." He didn't need to write anything else about the day he left for war, how painful that was. Caroline could remember that for herself easily enough.

She had wept openly that day at the port when he left, wrapping herself around him and leaving a big wet spot on his uniform. Up to that point, it was the sharpest pain she had ever imagined. Only now did she think how difficult that day must have been for *him*. Yes, it was horrible for her, watching him walk away, the person she loved most in the world. But he had to leave the *three* people he loved most. She couldn't even imagine it.

She remembered he'd kissed the top of her head and she could hear him swallowing his tears. She knew what that burn felt like, the way it worked its way all the way to your toes. But he was an army man, so crying was not an option for him. Besides, he wasn't the only one. There were other men, too, just like him, saying goodbye to wives and kids, each of them choking it all back.

He hadn't turned around once he'd started toward the ship. He couldn't. No way he'd have been able to withstand it if he did, Caroline was sure. He'd said his goodbyes and that had

to be it. She knew, though, that he was torn apart, and she knew also that it was made so much worse by the fact that the brief time he had with his family, just four days between his basic training in North Carolina and his heading off to Korea, had been almost entirely destroyed by a family illness, some kind of nasty flu.

No doubt he'd envisioned picnics with his wife and kids—huge spreads after what Caroline's mom described as the bland fare of the Army camps—out in Patterson Park near the Chinese Pagoda or in Druid Hill Park while couples rowed their boats in the lake below. Or maybe he'd hoped to picnic on Federal Hill, overlooking the harbor and the wharves. There were plenty of options.

But that darned virus with its fever, coughs, and aches had been working its way through the entire family for days. Only Sam—the first one to get it—had recovered by the time Caroline's father had to deploy. Caroline and her mom were well enough to see him off by then, but they had both spent almost the entire time he was home in bed.

So he spent those precious days doing little repairs around the house—he fixed a cracked window, replaced some roof tiles, ripped out and replaced some rotted wood near the flashings. And then, just like that, it was time to go.

All of that was too painful to think about for too long.

Caroline went downstairs, got a glass of water, made herself stay awake. She had her memories and the radio and that one letter all floating around in her head, and that was enough. Sometimes she didn't need any of those things; often her dreams came almost exclusively from the newsreels she'd seen in school and the ones that were shown before movies on those rare occasions when she went to the theater with her friends. She hated them, hated the way the announcer's voice was so serious but somehow always managed a slightly upbeat tone,

explaining how our brave American soldiers were fighting and winning the war for freedom and democracy and how the reels showed happy smiling men standing in circles smoking and laughing or at tables in mess halls over steaming trays of food. She knew it wasn't like that, at least where her dad was. She knew it was cold and lonely (and dangerous—he wrote of "fighter jets") where he was.

She went back to her room and tried to stay awake for a while longer. But she kept nodding off, in and out of sleep, imagining her father, imagining the world he was seeing. She envisioned him there, in his foxhole, dingy and dirty, but at least out of the freezing wind. She imagined him staring at the landscape she saw in those newsreels: great open plains pockmarked by stacks of vegetation, the old ripples of abandoned crops still visible. Hills rising from the distant horizon. She envisioned the soldiers taking turns manning their positions along the ridge, guarding against a sneak attack. It was cold. The men dressed in heavy jackets, plumes of breath coming from their mouths and noses, as they sat trying to warm themselves with cigarettes, conversation, and thoughts of home. As hard as they probably tried to keep their thoughts from floating home and to their loved ones, it must have been impossible.

Caroline knew it hurt her dad badly to think about home, but she guessed that at times he just couldn't help himself, just like she couldn't help herself from thinking about him. Maybe it was one of those weird "good sort of pain" things. Or not; she just couldn't know for sure. All she had was her imagination, and that, sometimes, was her worst enemy.

Of course, that kind of pain, even when it got bad, was in some ways a good thing, she knew. Because the alternative was worse: she imagined her dad seeing lines of men, the enemy, coming toward him, coming in for an attack. That, of course, wouldn't be boring, but it certainly would be worse than anything.

Again, she tried to beat away the thoughts of her dad. Better to think about something else. *Negroes in school with white kids?* That was something new. And how to feel about that. As she told her friends, it didn't bother her any. But of course that was easy to say about something you hadn't actually experienced.

Oh, well—who knew if it would ever actually come to be? If it did, she'd deal with it then. For now, she needed to get some sleep.