

## The Wedding Night

Eleanor Austin Guilbert

*Blessing on the hand of woman!  
Angels guard her strength and grace;  
In the cottage, palace, hovel!  
O, no matter where the place!  
Would that never storms assailed it;  
Rainbows ever gently curled;  
For the hand that rocks the cradle  
Is the hand that rules the world.*

*-William Ross Wallace*

### January 1942.

The United States has declared war and is a family in crisis. The draft called eligible citizens into active duty; thousands of teenaged boys stood in line to volunteer their futures. Patriotism ran in the nation's blood. The war demanded sacrifice; the times demanded courage.

### Battle Creek, Michigan.

The Coopersmith family was seated at the dining room table, all six of them. They should have been celebrating. The eldest daughter, Katherine, was getting married at noon the next day in one of the white chapels that polka-dotted the flat countryside. Katherine was engaged to a recently commissioned officer in the United States Army. Everyone around the table was nutty about Lt. Frederick Cannon. He fit right into their lives and he was nutty about Katherine. Everyone could see that. So why did no one seem to have anything to say, not even sixteen-year-old Caroline, her eyes fixed on her sister?

Did Katherine look like a bride-to-be? Caroline wondered. Did she look like a virgin? How did a virgin look, anyhow? Like Botticelli's Venus-on-the-Half-Shell with ropes of tangled blond hair and small breasts, all naked and glowing, peaches and gold? Katherine was not glowing tonight, nor was she blond, and Caroline very much doubted she was a virgin. Their father must think so. Or why would he have made such a gallant presentation of his gift, a white silk nightgown done up in white tissue, tied with white satin ribbons with his handwritten note that made Katherine look the other way when she read it. Why?

And what the hell difference did it make? Struggling with the imponderables, Caroline leapt up when the telephone rang. Telephone calls were unacceptable during the dinner hour. Callers were alerted to this rule in no uncertain terms.

"Long distance?" Caroline queried. "Canada?" She beckoned Katherine, who pushed away from the table. "Rules are made to be broken!" Five faces turned toward Katherine, now leaning against the telephone table tucked into the corner of the library. Five faces watched her as she adroitly opened the closet door with one hand and backed into the closet holding the newfangled French phone, careful not to cut the connection. No one

could hear what was going on between Canada and the United States.

Adeline Coopersmith's eye connected with her husband's. She was a large woman who exuded authority. She surveyed her three remaining children: Caroline, restless Buddy, and twelve-year-old Betsy at her left. All heads were bowed. Though awaiting the meal blessing, each concentrated on the closed closet door and the Canadian connection that meant only one thing: trouble. "We're supposed to have more snow tomorrow, Cyril," Adeline Coopersmith said, her grey eyes sparkling as she postponed her husband's petition to the Lord.

"So I hear," he answered. "We'll make it to the chapel, come hell or high water!" Theatrically clasping his hands together, he bowed his head in apology for the delay: "Almighty God, we are ever mindful of thy bountiful gifts. We thank you for this meal. We ask you to bless this food and us to your service. And we ask you to bless our beloved daughter, Katherine Coopersmith, as she enters into marriage with Frederick Cannon tomorrow."

There was a long pause before his "Amen" released the tension and four heads popped up like puppets on a string. The children glanced furtively at one another as their father began to carve the roast, passing the first plate to Betsy who dutifully passed it to her mother. Adeline, in turn, smiled at her youngest daughter, a conformist and achiever. Still plump with baby fat as she romped through grammar school, Betsy was a pianist and an all-A student. Curvaceous with a beguiling smile, her popularity and actions were predictable. Betsy was the easy child.

Caroline's thoughts were ruffled. Her loyalty was with Fred Cannon; he could be trusted with her sister's life. He was resolute, handsome, and considerate. His gifts of Whitman's chocolates and red roses wrapped in green wax paper during their short courtship attested to his kindness. He had told stories to their mother, sitting on the front porch swing, making her laugh. Fred could make Adeline Coopersmith act like a young woman. Amazing.

And yet, Caroline's mind raced. The call from Canada had to be from Jack Parks, Katherine's high school steady. Lanky and laid back, he was destined to follow his father's footsteps: make a substantial living with minimal effort. However, six months ago, Jack Parks fooled everyone by enlisting in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He must have completed his flight training by now and could be sent overseas. Caroline had goosebumps. Was he asking her sister to wait for him? Would Jack be ready to go to war, prove them all wrong, and come back a hero?

Caroline was caught up in the romance of it all. Anyone who had the guts to fly and fight the Nazis! Her heart hurt as she remembered Jack, straight and tall, Jack in his RAF uniform, reaching out to her sister during his last furlough. She had walked in on the two of them in each other's arms on the living room couch. She dared not imagine Katherine's reaction to this call from Canada. Nor her parents' reaction. They were all for Fred Cannon, for security and propriety.

Caroline closed her ears to the talk around the table. Passing the butter, practicing the piano? Inconsequential. Her feelings were ambivalent. As Katherine's designated maid of honor, Caroline was anxious for the wedding ceremony. She and her mother had helped Katherine select her wedding outfit, a designer suit in a lovely shade of blue. Oh, she was ready. But was her big sister?

After five minutes, Katherine burst through the double doors sobbing. The family knew they could not staunch her tears. Katherine's behavior was unpredictable these days

and set off her mother's equally mercurial temperament. The pyrotechnics between the two saddened Cyril Coopersmith, Attorney and Counselor at Law, who remained markedly reserved.

Caroline pushed away from the table and rushed up the stairs, two at a time. She followed Katherine into their bedroom. The bride-to-be lay face down, still sobbing. Caroline stood helplessly, awed as usual by her sister's physical beauty even as she lay bawling. She had the coloring and delicate features of Merle Oberon, one of their favorite movie stars. She had graceful long legs, a 22" waist, and full breasts she had to carefully tuck into her bra. Boys had flocked to Katherine the moment she catapulted from tomboy into this young woman with dusky skin and almond eyes. She had perfected a way of looking past people, keeping them at a distance--everyone but Jack Parks. Their relationship posed a constant threat and frustration to her mother. Her father was aware of this conflict, but he was not one to interfere.

Caroline hovered over her sister. There was no doubt about it, Katherine Coopersmith was one of a kind. Unique. At baptisms, their minister held up babies to the congregation for their ooohs and ahhs. "One of a kind and perfect in every way," he would declare. True, each of us is special, she thought, but, damn it, why does Katherine have to be so unique? So unpredictable.

"He wants me to wait for him," Katherine sobbed. "I've promised....," her shoulders heaved her frustration. "I promised to marry Fred tomorrow. I've promised..." She thrashed from side to side, and suddenly Caroline knew the wedding would happen as planned. Nothing, 'come hell or high water', would stop it now. It was a *fait accompli*. Adeline Coopersmith's unbending rectitude had won. Their father would walk his firstborn down the aisle, and everyone would heave a sigh of relief. At noon tomorrow, Katherine would become the beloved wife of a good man. Aunts and uncles, cousins and friends would be in the chapel to witness the union. Jack Parks' proposal was belated and abandoned.

### **Camp Custer Chapel and Officer's Club.**

The Catholic chaplain who conducted the abbreviated service stood between two families of equally strong faith traditions. The Cannons were a rollicking Irish family, six brothers and one sister. Their mother sat in the front pew, a green velvet toque perched on her white head, wearing a dress draped from the same fabric. The elegantly turned out Coopersmiths, strong and proud in their Protestantism, sat across the aisle. The man-of-the-cloth exercised all his ecumenical skills to keep the Holy Ghost hovering over Katherine's and Fred's shoulders.

"Dearly beloved: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony. The bond and covenant of marriage... and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God..."

The chaplain's voice droned on. Caroline wondered at how he directed the newlyweds into the marriage bed with God's blessing, no less. The beautiful bride dutifully repeated her vows. Caroline remembered the white nightgown and felt at ease with her sister's decision. Feeling the weight of the guests behind her, she shrugged her shoulders. Katherine, who stood very still and serious, concentrating on the celebrant's words.

That the Coopersmith/Cannon wedding was actually taking place was a miracle. By early morning, the predicted snowstorm had turned into a fierce blizzard. The 25-mile drive to Camp Custer was a nightmare. It could have been a catastrophe except for the driving skills of Cyril Coopersmith who promised the night before, "Come hell or high water, we'll make it to the church." Blinding snow spat against the windshield, spinning a white mesh veil between the driver and oncoming traffic. How many invited guests would make it through the storm was an unspoken question.

As it turned out, more than half of the guests found the chapel which glistened like spun sugar in the snowy landscape. Several of the invitees missed the ceremony but showed up at the Officers' Club for the reception. Caroline's boyfriend never showed. That left her free to cavort with Gerald Petroulli, Fred's best man, a jaunty 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. with an Italian American attitude of gallantry toward women and an irresistible smile.

Now that Katherine and Fred were joined together in holy matrimony, all hell broke loose. A small combo played Glenn Miller hits, people crowded around the punch bowl, elbowed their way onto the dance floor, talked and laughed and celebrated with vigor. The storm was subsiding, the Club jumping, and Caroline was having the time of her life.

A dance? Up close, and why not? Her dress swung in back, exposing her full thighs. Did she care? Not one whit. They danced and dipped, so closely linked that the brass buttons on Gerald's dress blouse left an imprint on her sheath. "Great wedding!" he whirled her around the floor, a swift and graceful partner.

Breathless, Caroline agreed, "A wonderful wedding..." She had nothing more to say. Jack Parks and his proposal were forgotten. Caroline and her best friend, Peg, would discuss all of this later, when they were at her grandparents' house in town.

### **Garrison Street House, Battle Creek, Michigan.**

It was well after midnight when the two young women brushed the snow off each other's shoulders and stomped their high-heeled boots before entering Isobel and Edmund Patton's house. The night air was cold as steel. Tiny crystals of moisture collected on the tip of Caroline's nose as she fumbled for the keys; Peg brushed them off with her mitten.

Caroline felt silly from the punch and lightheaded from all the dancing. She remembered how Katherine looked in her black fox jacket tipped with rice as she headed out of the Officers' Club with Fred Cannon's arm around her, guiding her toward coexistence. The young, the beautiful Katherine, her tiny, flowered hat with the white petals and velvet bows slightly skewed as she cantered away from family and friends. At last. A decision. A departure.

Caroline's maternal grandparents had agreed to share their upstairs bedroom with the girls while wedding guests filled the Coopersmith house. The two young women, aware of this arrangement, were quiet as mice. Caroline finally got the key to turn in the icy lock.

"C'mon, Peg, it's okay," she whispered, pushing the heavy door open and beaming her pocket flashlight up the carpeted staircase. Caroline had never been upstairs in her grandparents' house. She clung onto the banister until she reached the landing to wait for her friend. The two young women mounted the half dozen more steps together, hand

in hand.

"It's this room," Caroline whispered, "I think!" Being a stranger in her grandparents' house struck her as absurd, but she had never dared to venture upstairs without an invitation. She had never been invited.

Visits had always been abbreviated and usually with her mother. In the summer, it was a walk through the double parlors out to the back porch with a hammock at one end and hollyhocks bobbing behind the screens. She always read while her mother and her grandmother strolled around the backyard, admiring the tall delphiniums. They picked pansies and leaf lettuce, the latter to be served in blue and white bowls, covered with thick cream and a spoonful of sugar. Summer visits ended with the three generations seated at the dining room table, quietly nibbling.

Caroline could not shake the indelible image of Grandma Patton, scornful and indignant, striking out at her father. The altercation had never been explained to her, the seven-year-old child who stood by his side. It had something to do with her mother's fourth pregnancy and her grandmother's fear for a safe delivery. The memory of the assault persisted; Grandma Patton remained a formidable presence in her life.

"Grandma's room," Caroline whispered. "We made it!" The absurdity of their being strangers struck her funny bone. But then, so had the wedding reception with all of the good-looking officers and the boisterous conviviality rampant in the Officers' Club. All present had shared joy and relief in Katherine's wedding; it ensured stability for the unpredictable and glamorous female icon in their midst.

Jack Parks would find his way elsewhere, overseas. Caroline could soon replicate Katherine's decision, turn in her single status for a socially acceptable role as a married woman. It was disconcerting. She could also become a bride to be loved by everyone for so becoming. Or could she? Would she want to? It was a puzzlement.

Isobel Patton's bedroom was chilly and smelled of camphor and sweet cedar. Caroline walked to the half window facing north and drew the shade. The snowfall had made its own curtain shielding the two young women from view. Here they undressed in privacy, surrounded by shadows. Everything in the room was sacrosanct; the presence of Caroline's grandmother was palpable. She had borne three children in this very room, on this bed with its white flannel sheets and plump down pillows.

"Grandma wore a size two wedding shoe," Caroline ventured. "Size two!"

"I wish we could find such a tiny, little shoe," Peg said. "I can't imagine such a tiny, little foot!"

The low-hung closet door was latched, defying the two young guests. Dare they open it to peer inside? Barefoot and shivering, Caroline, now in a long flannel nightgown, and Peg in pajamas hugged each other for warmth.

"Her foot was as tiny as her sharp little tongue," Caroline said as she swung the closet door open.

She beamed the flashlight into the darkness. A row of hatboxes lined the top shelf. Hunched under a white linen sheet, Isobel Patton's fur stole hung next to her heavy, full-length Persian lamb coat, unworn for years. The smell of dry leather and mothballs

pervaded the space. One flowered silk chiffon dress and two silk pongee blouses hung alongside a dark plum-colored velvet suit. Reserved for Thanksgiving and Christmas at the Coopersmiths, pressed and waiting. Under the clothes rack, the floorboards gleamed empty.

Where were the size two wedding shoes, those symbols of stunted femininity, virginity? "Maybe Grandma kept them in this drawer," Caroline ventured. She had moved from the closet to the dressing table with its three-way beveled mirror.

Seated now on the narrow bench, she opened the right-hand drawer to rummage through tissue paper so brittle from disuse it flaked at her touch. "Maybe in here," she pulled open the middle drawer. There were the treasures, wrapped in faded blue tissue paper. She held them up for Peg to admire. "Do you believe it?"

Peg stood close behind Caroline, pressing against her. The warmth of their two young bodies mingled in the frosty room. "Do you believe it?" she repeated, the featherweight of the wedding shoes resting in one palm. Like tiny birds, they held the promise of new life and spoke of the fragility of a young woman's life in the 1890s. These incredibly tiny shoes could not take a step without a partner, a man's boots. Delicate and white, they were worn once and replaced by Victorian leather lace-up shoes.

Within the year, when it was time to reproduce, the shoes would be set aside. Isobel Patton and all the other brides would then lie vulnerable. Either beneath a bearded physician or a midwife, they endured relentless prodding and pulling in the process of childbirth. A barefoot exercise in endurance, and a very private one.

The two young women shivered in the dim light, holding onto one another. Caroline held up a nosegay of white roses, stiff with age and tied with yellowed ribbons. A strong little hand once held that bouquet, she thought. The strong little right hand that grabbed a hunk of mane to mount any horse and ride bareback, ride anywhere, ride with the wind. What was it like to be an only daughter in a big farm family, the brightest one of the bunch? What was it like to marry at seventeen? She had become a dutiful wife and brood mare the same year, doing that and nothing more for the rest of her life.

Caroline shivered. She nested her grandmother's tiny wedding shoes in her cupped hands. Weighing the possibilities.

"Come to bed, Caroline," Peg urged. Caroline took one last look at herself in the triple mirror. Although not as beautiful as her sisters, she would have been considered an ideal female figure by medieval artists. Her body was angular, yet graceful with perfectly molded breasts set high; she was a Cimabue virgin minus the Christ child.

She smiled as she slid into bed next to her best friend infused with love and a haunting loneliness. The young women lay like two silver spoons, clasped tight together. On her sister's wedding night, Caroline Adele Coopersmith, tired and trembling, forgot to say her prayers. Or chose not to.