

A Letter to Mrs. Roosevelt



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C. COCO DE YOUNG

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Mrs. Roosevelt*

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A Yearling Book



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Chapter 1



THE SHOOTING STAR JOHNSTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

I never used to pay much attention to the dark. Well, except for the nights when I sat on our front-porch swing, counting the stars and waiting. I would find a patch of stars caught between the rooftops across the street and swing and count, and count and wait.

One night my best friend's mother called to me from her porch next door, "Margo, go inside. It's raining. There are no stars for you to count."

"Thank you, Mrs. Meglio, but I can still see the stars from last night," I called back. I didn't tell her that my eyes were closed tight and I was trying to remember them.

Nighttime was my friend back then, keeping me company while I waited for the trolley car to bring Mama and Papa home. I could hear the clatter as it crossed over the First Street Bridge and turned right

onto Maple Avenue. Papa would climb down the steps, then hold out his hand to Mama. I could tell right then if Charlie—he's my little brother—had had a good day or bad.

Charlie had been kicked in the knee when he'd tried to break up a fight between two boys during a game of kickball. He'd convinced Mama and Papa that it was an accident, but I was not so sure. I can remember hearing Charlie groan during the night. I went in to check him, but he was sound asleep. The next morning Charlie's knee looked like a balloon. He stayed in bed all day. It didn't help. When the doctor visited that evening he told Papa to get Charlie to the hospital immediately. The infection in Charlie's knee bone was called osteomyelitis.

Every day for four months Mama and Papa rode the trolley to Mercy Hospital to visit Charlie. Every night for four months I waited for their return.

I was seven. The hospital rules posted in the front lobby said I was too young to visit my brother. That's why I stayed home, although Sister Cecilia did sneak me up to the third-floor children's ward to see Charlie one time. It was in January, right after Charlie's accident. She held her arm out to Mama as if she was guiding her through the halls, and hid me between the folds of the long, draping sleeve of her habit. She told me that two things were certain: if we could get past Mother Superior it would be a miracle, and

the best medicine for Charlie was to know how much we all loved him.

Charlie was in a big room with other children, some older and some younger than his five years. I remember rushing over to the pillow covered with the familiar dark brown curls. "Charlie," I whispered, "I've come to take you home." I would help Mama and Papa take care of Charlie.

Charlie opened his eyes, and my heart sank at the same time. He looked all swallowed up in that big hospital bed with sides like a crib. I knew then that it would be a long time before Charlie would play Caddy with me and my best friend, Rosa. I just knew I would have to wait to play anything with Charlie, and I did.

Nobody ever told me why Sister Cecilia snuck me up to his room, but I think they were afraid Charlie would die. He was sick, really sick. The doctor operated on Charlie's knee, but the infection spread further down. The doctor wanted to amputate Charlie's leg above the knee. Papa told the doctor he would do anything he had to do to save Charlie's leg—the whole leg. That was when he and Mama found out about the doctor in Boston—if he couldn't help Charlie, then nobody could. Papa arranged for him to come to Johnstown and operate on Charlie's leg. Charlie ended up with a stiff knee, and he wore a shoe with a raised heel, but the doctor saved Charlie's whole leg.

Charlie finally came home at the end of April. At night he sat on the porch swing with me. He would point to the different constellations; then I would count the stars in them. We could hear Mama humming inside, and we thought the worst was over. It wasn't.



Everything started to change in May, after Mrs. DiLuso saw the shooting star. I remember she didn't even knock. I had just mopped the parlor floor for Mama when Mrs. DiLuso came rushing through the front door. With one step onto the wet floor, that four-foot-high, four-foot-around woman was all arms and legs, screeching wildly, "Oh, aaah, Ma-a-a-ma mia!" as she slid across the room.

One look from Mama and I bit the sides of my cheeks to keep from laughing at Mrs. DiLuso, the human cannonball. I stayed in the room long enough to see her come to a crashing halt, sprawled across the small table where I had sorted my postcard collection. Later Mama explained that Mrs. DiLuso had seen a star shooting across the sky above our neighborhood the night before. According to Mrs. DiLuso, who is very superstitious, it meant death or bad times for someone on Maple Avenue. There must have been a lot of shooting stars that night.

That same week Miss Penton, my teacher at Maple Avenue School, decided to fail the entire second grade. She insisted that there were students in our

class who were not ready for third grade. If she failed one, she promised, she would fail everyone . . . and she did.

My papa was the only parent who wasn't afraid of Miss Penton's sharp tongue and puckered lips. He walked me to school one morning after the announcement, then made me wait in the hallway while he spoke with her. I heard him introduce himself. I didn't hear a word from Miss Penton. Papa went on to explain that he and Mama felt certain that I was prepared to attend third grade next year. He told her that I could add, subtract, multiply, use a cash register, make change, and write orders at our family store. I knew Miss Penton was angry; I heard her tapping a ruler on her desk the way she always did when someone crossed her. Miss Penton either ignored Papa's explanation, or did not hear a word he said while she tapped away. She simply told Papa that we Italian immigrants were in America now, and that our last name, Bandini, should be changed to Bandin. I couldn't hear what Papa said to Miss Penton, but my full name, Margo Bandini, remained on my report card. Papa won one battle, and Miss Penton won the other. The entire class, including Rosa and me, repeated the second grade.

That was four years ago, in 1929. Everything has changed on Maple Avenue. And to think I wasn't afraid—not then.

Eleven-year-old Margo Bandini has never been afraid of anything. Her life in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, with Mama and Papa and her little brother, Charlie, has always felt secure. But it's 1933, and the Great Depression is changing things for families all across America.

In school, Margo is learning about the causes of the Depression. She admires Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady, who is known as Eleanor Everywhere for her travels around the country to help people. Then one day the impossible happens: Papa cannot make the payments for their house, and the Sheriff Sale sign goes up on their front door. They have two weeks to pay the bank, or they must leave their home forever. Now Margo is afraid—but she's also determined to find a way to help Papa save their home.

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