

The announcer asked everyone to stand for *The National Anthem*. Both teams filed onto the field and stood at attention, caps over their hearts. A microphone was strung out to home plate and placed in front of a girl from Pyrite High. Coach Mueller escorted Mr. and Mrs. Lichtermann behind the microphone. Mr. Lichtermann wore a Navy uniform, blue and sharply pressed. His arms, indeed, must have stretched over the years because the sleeves of the topcoat stopped several inches from his wrists.

“What’s Old Man Lichtermann doing out there?” asked Weiner.

“He’s a vet,” replied Joe Lyles. “Navy.”

“Old Man Lichtermann was in the Navy?”

“He flew fighter planes in World War II. He was a good friend of my grandfather and used our last name to join up so he wouldn’t sound so German.”

Looking at the elderly couple standing at home plate, George tried to imagine Officer Lichtermann – Captain *Lyles* – as a young man with regular-sized arms, a Missouri farm boy who became a dashing fighter pilot while his beautiful young wife waited patiently for him to return home. Old people were not always what they appeared.

The Pyrite girl stepped up to the microphone, and the band struck up the national anthem. Despite her youth, she had a strong, mature voice. When she hit the high, pure, piercing note at the end of the lyric “And the Land of the Free,” she paused, the Pyrite band paused, and everyone on the field and in the stands paused. In those silent moments, Mrs. Lichtermann led Mr. Lichtermann in his blue Navy uniform to the microphone. In a crackling but vibrant voice, he crooned, “And the home . . . of the . . . brave,” the last note of which was lost in the tumultuous roar of the crowd.

A shiver shot down George’s back. Here was baseball, *real* baseball. *The National Anthem*, the roar of the crowd, the smell of green grass, the blistering sun, the humidity that could fill up your lungs with poisonous fluids, the peanuts and Cracker Jack, the I-don’t-care-if-I-ever-get-back grand American celebration. If he never got off the bench in this game, that was all right. He was here, with *his* team in the dugout, his family and friends in the stands. Yes, sir, baseball was being played here today in Small Town, USA, here in the land of the free, the home of the brave, the haven of the crazy, the country of the kissed and kissless, and there was no place George Seibenmann would rather be.

The umpire called, “Batter up!” And the game commenced.

