

**On a**

**ROLL**

**in the**

**Suburbs**

The story of an 11 year-old  
girl in the 1950s whose love of  
roller-skating motivates her  
to invent something that is  
years ahead of its time

written by  
**Ellyn Bache**

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It snows a week  
before Christmas and,  
in the suburbs, there  
are no plows around to  
clean it up.



#### 4 - Christmas

A week before Christmas, it does something it almost never does until mid-January. It snows.

I mean, it *seriously* snows. Big flakes begin drifting down in the middle of the afternoon, slowly at first and then harder, and don't stop until sometime during the night. We wake up the next morning to a solid covering of white. And no school! Mom makes pancakes and hot chocolate, and then everyone heads outside to sled and build snowmen and have snowball fights.

Back in the city, it never took very long before snow plows came along and cleared the streets. Traffic would be slow at first and then back to normal. Even in the coldest weather the snow would be gone before

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the morning was over, except for the mounds the plows had pushed to the curb.

Here, some of the parents come out to shovel the sidewalks, but there's no sign of snow plows. And there's too much snow to drive on. Dad can't go to work, and neither can anyone else. Back in the city, he had to leave late one time, but I don't remember him ever having to miss a whole day.

"This could be great, Dad," Rob tells him. "You might be home from work, and we might be home from school all the rest of the week!"

"I hate to disappoint you," Dad says, "but I wouldn't count on it."

"But look." Rob points to the snowy street.

"Out here in the suburbs, until recently there weren't a lot of neighborhoods like ours. They didn't need many snow plows. Now that there are more people and roads, they'll have to buy more equipment. In the meantime, it's going to take longer to clear the streets, but they'll get to us. Probably pretty soon."

Rob looks disappointed.

"Dad, you *like* having an extra holiday, don't you?" Patti asks.

"Sure," he tells her with a grin. "But I'd like it even better if I got paid for it."

Just as Dad says, the plows finally arrive and scrape the streets. The next day, Dad is off to work and school is back in session. We don't mind so much because we know Christmas break is just around the corner. I help Mom address about a million Christmas

cards, and Patti licks about a million three-cent stamps and puts them on the envelopes.

“This glue tastes awful,” Patti says after a while. “They ought to make stamps with sticky stuff already on the back so you don’t have to lick them.”

“I don’t imagine that will ever happen,” Mom laughs. “But you can wet the glue with a sponge if you want to.”

Patti shrugs and keeps licking.

Christmas at our house has always been the same. Early in the morning, Patti gets up before it’s light and drags everyone else downstairs to see what’s under the tree. Amazingly, we always find a mound of wrapped packages which – according to Patti – were not anywhere in the vicinity the night before – “Not in the house, not in the yard, not anywhere!” she insists.

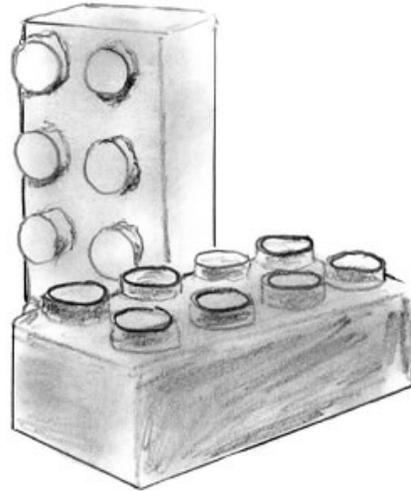
My main gift is a record player, which is exactly what I want. It’s the kind with a thick spindle in the middle for stacking 45 rpm records and letting them drop, so you can play one song after another. There are also a couple of Elvis records. I knew I was going to get those, too.

Rob gets a football and the usual model rocket stuff. There’s also a package Dad says was brought over from Europe by one of his engineer friends. It’s a set of plastic blocks in a bunch of different colors.

At first I think maybe Dad has lost his mind. Isn’t Rob a little old for blocks?

“These aren’t ordinary blocks,” Dad assures us. “They’re called Legos –interlocking blocks that allow

Dad gets Rob a new toy called "Legos" that he says will be a hit. They look like boring building blocks to me.



you to build just about anything – buildings, space ships, whole cities.”

“Oh.” But to me, blocks are blocks. I have the feeling Rob thinks so, too.

“They’re still working on the design over in Europe where they’re made,” Dad tells us. “I really think they’re going to catch on.”

“Oh, sure,” Rob says. “I can see that.” But I can tell he’s faking. Annoying as he is, I hate to see him disappointed on Christmas morning. I lean over and whisper in his ear, “I think this is one of these presents Dad bought for himself.”

Rob laughs, and I feel a lot better.

Just when we finish opening all the packages, Mom looks at the wrapping paper strewn across the floor and gets a puzzled look on her face. She turns to

Dad. "Didn't you forget something?"

Dad's expression goes blank for a minute. Then he snaps his fingers. "Yes! I remember now. I think it's in the kitchen. Why don't you go check?"

Mom goes out. A second later she comes back with something squirmy wrapped in the folds of her robe. The furry creature she unwraps is black and white, no bigger than her hand, and apparently very frightened. Mom holds it out to Patti.

"A kitten! For *me*?"

Mom nods and sets it into Patti's arms. The kitten stops squirming and looks up at her. It begins to purr. For a long moment, Patti strokes its head and studies it intently. Even before she makes her announcement, I can see her making up her mind to give it the brilliantly original name of Spot.

But she surprises me. "Look at that those markings." She points to the kitten's face, her eyes shining. "I'm going to name it Panda."

At noon, all the relatives begin to arrive for Christmas dinner. Grandma and Grandpa. Uncle Dave and Aunt Sally. Our cousins Jemila and Tim. Dad carves the roast while Mom passes around the mashed potatoes, the gravy, the green beans, the rolls. The room is actually quiet for a few minutes as everyone digs in. Then Dad and his brother, Uncle Dave, begin to talk, as they always do, about their work.

"Well," says Uncle Dave, with a smile that looks a little sad, "when I got my degree in architecture, I

Uncle Dave's entire career was ruined when Senator McCarthy accused him of being a Communist.



never thought I'd end up in the dry cleaning business, but it's more interesting than I thought. Running a store can be quite a challenge."

"If you wanted to be an architect, why did you end up with a dry cleaning store?" Rob asks, too busy stuffing his mouth to see the look Mom gives him.

Uncle Dave puts down his fork. "I lost my job when I was investigated at the McCarthy hearings," he says. "Do you know what they were?"

Rob shakes his head no.

"McCarthy was a senator who thought there was a Communist conspiracy to overthrow the government. He was trying to find out who was involved," Uncle Dave tells him. "But his committee got carried away. They called in all kinds of people,

whether they had a good reason or not. It wasn't fair. A lot of the people who were called – including me – decided not to answer any questions, as a protest against the unfairness. Not answering is something you're allowed to do under our country's laws."

"And that's why you lost your job?"

"Even if there was no reason why you should be investigated," Uncle Dave says, "the company you worked for might be afraid you were a Communist. Or else they might worry the government might think *they* were Communists unless they fired you. No one else would want to hire you, either."

"Are you a Communist?" Rob asks.

"No." Uncle Dave shakes his head. "A communist government pushes its citizens around, and that's wrong. But it was my own government that accused me of being a Communist. And that's wrong, too. I lost my job, but I think it was worth it. It was important to me not to let the government push me around."

"Oh." Rob sounds a little confused. I'm a little confused, myself. All I know is, the looks on the faces of the adults around the table show they think Uncle Dave was brave.

Then he smiles. "Fortunately," he tells us, "I was able to buy my own business and be my own boss. The only way I'll lose my job now is by not doing it well. Right now, I'm lucky. People can afford to have their clothes cleaned whenever they want. That wasn't always the case when the economy wasn't so good."

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“When they were kids,” Grandma says, indicating Dad and Uncle Dave, “people were so poor that they couldn’t afford to have their clothes dry cleaned at all. I remember using a little water, trying to get stains out. I remember . . .”

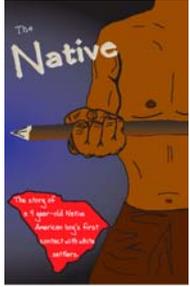
Grandpa puts his hand over hers to stop her. “But we’re not going to talk about that today,” he says. “Today is Christmas!”



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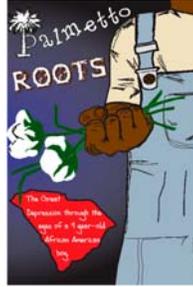
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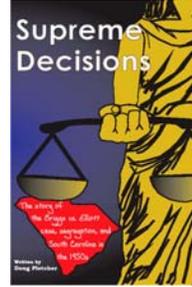
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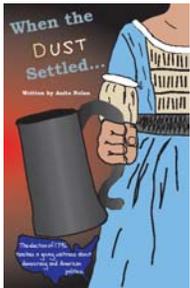
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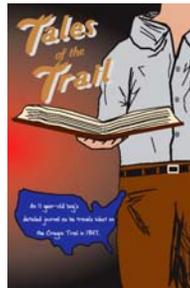
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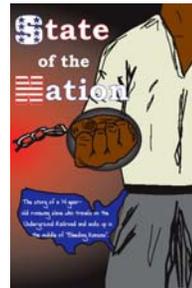
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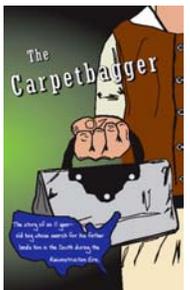
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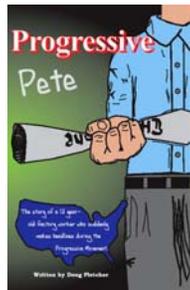
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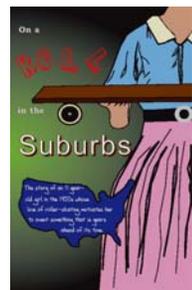
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