

# Beat Beats The Golden Carp

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## Chapter 1: Bomb Fire

"Keety, just accidentally kick it into the pit!" commands ten-year-old Beatrice Reed to her lanky blond friend in the smoky glow of a roadside flare.

"But Beat, that big cherry bomb will burn my shoe," worries Keith Mazurkewicz, instead skidding his sneaker into the dusty track of Tea Street as the little kids skitter out of the circle of light into the chilly dusk of early spring. "It might even explode."

"Nah, it only looks like a bomb," Beat explains, tapping the black canister with her own shoe as the younger children creep back into the charred sweetness and spreading warmth of the kerosene smoke ring. "These pots just burn slowly."

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The road crew had yet to cover the drop inlets for the paving of the dirt road along the Middlebrook. Tea Street connected the former Old York Road, now called Talmadge Avenue, to the gap through the Watchung Mountains at Chimney Rock Road. This was the path the redcoats had taken to attempt and fail to breach the breastworks atop First Watchung while George Washington's eight thousand ragtag troops recuperated behind the ridge from the hard winter of 1777-78. The naming of the street was lost in the nearly two centuries since, but the tea was just as likely from color of the spring runoff as it was from the Boston harbor act that had initiated the colonial hostilities. These same muddy waters would soon run beneath Tea Street in a drainage pipe to save the basements of Downs Manor from repeated flooding.

It was an exciting time for the children of that new subdivision. A line of excavators and bulldozers became the preferred jungle gym for after supper jaunts in the lengthening evenings. Piles of gravel and dirt afforded great fun for king-of-the-hill or bicycle jumps. The pièces de résistance arrived the night before the paving started and in the form of Dietz #87 cast iron smudge pots set in front of each of the open manholes.

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"Holy smokes!" Keith exclaims, leaping back as the flames shoot up into the air.

"Yeah, that's enough cardboard," Beat calls to the little kids again scurrying away from the bomb fire.

"See you tomorrow," he calls back as he runs off toward his family's house halfway around Hanken Road with his little brothers in tow.

"Chicken shit," she mutters before rounding up her sister and brother from the edge of the firelight and steering them home.

## Chapter 2: Three Trees

"You're the oldest girl now," preaches Mrs. Reed the next morning as Beat is headed for the door. "It's your job to take care of the young 'uns."

"All right already," scowls that first daughter, crossing index and middle fingers as she turns back to the living room where Beulah and Wiley are watching Captain Kangaroo on the television. "Come on you two!"

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The Reed family had only recently moved to New Jersey from eastern Kentucky where the dogs and children had run free over the hills and hollers. There it was the usual role of older daughters to keep an eye on little siblings while the mother did the cooking, cleaning, washing, and shopping. This mostly worked in the close knit hill communities where neighbors were often aunts or cousins. As for fathers, it was either the coal mine or the still, which is why Mr. Reed had taken the whole gaggle up the hillbilly highway.

Bound Brook was a small town at the base of a hill, but successive waves of immigrants, in turn taking their first generation stigmatization, had created a culture of ethnic neighborhoods. The Down's Manor subdivision was one of the first of the post-war equal opportunity housing developments where children of any ethnicity were forming their own community. By the spring of 1962 Beatrice and her older brother Blaine had fought their way past the hick label, her with words, him with fists as they abandoned their southern drawl for a central Jersey accent.

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"Wiley, you take the little one, Beulah gets the middle one, and I'll climb this one," Beat begins, leading them over to a remnant wood lot between their house and D'Angelo's bar. "We can watch the pavers from up in these trees."

"You just grab a limb and swing your feet up like this," demonstrates six-year-old Beulah to her four-year-old little brother who's about to cry because he doesn't know how to scale the smooth white trunk. "Once you're standing on a branch it's easy to go up."

Soon all three are halfway up the budding sycamores and watching a dump truck spill gravel over the dirt track.

"There's a golden carp in the brook this year," exclaims Keety Mazurkewicz wobbling by on his bike.

"Hey you, get off this rough road before you get run over," yells one of the workmen helping to lay down a manhole cover.

Beat scampers down the peeling bark and runs after Keety who's pedaling as fast as he can down the previously paved Hanken Road.

"Come on Wiley," assures Beulah helping him climb down. "We can watch from the porch."

## Chapter 3: The Cave

"Okay you two, dig at the bottom of the slide," commands slender Beat, her hazel eyes turning the same bronze as her tanned complexion as she leads her diminutive siblings across the brook to a sloped hillside of exposed shale. "There's a cave under there where a soldier died."

"I call knife," enthuses black-haired Beulah, hefting a hunk of crumbling red rock into the fishing hole just downstream of the ledge.

"Rifle," calls Beat while wading upstream and peering into the pool below each riffle.

Little Wiley redoubles his effort at pulling out flat rocks while imagining the sword fight he would soon be having.

"Keep digging!" admonishes Beat, continuing her piscine search under the Route 28 bridge as a big black bird calls from up on one of the columns.

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Fishing was a favorite pastime for children in a town surrounded by streams. Every stretch of the aquatic border was claimed by an adjoining neighborhood gang. The Green Brook to the east was patrolled by the raggedy East Enders below Union Avenue and by the mysterious Crazlewood Gang to the north. The Middlebrook along the western boundary had the Italian West Enders at its lower stretches, our Roadies along the new Downs Manor subdivision, and the feral Crescent Drive Kids north of Union. Then there were the Needers.

The close-knit family was new to town and spilled forth each day from an abandoned victorian house with a crumbling roof and absent window panes on West Second Street. Children walking past knew to hold their breath until well beyond that haunted house known as the Kluzacs for its former squatters. Living there marked the Needers as dangerous, as did having a child who spoke broken English in nearly every grade at nearby LaMonte School.

Word got around fast when a new fish arrived in one of the boundary waterways. Soon every group of kids was on the lookout for the rainbow trout that escaped downstream from Tom's Brook behind First Watchung, for those black eels coming upstream again from the Raritan, for the suckers sitting on the bottom of clear pools, for lampreys below the river spillways, or for that gargantuan green eel in the deepest hole.

Rumors of a golden carp in the Middlebrook had spread quickly in the spring of 1962, and ideas of how to catch it were equally infectious. Only a number six Eagle Claw hook would snag its huge mouth. Not just any worm would call it over, only the fattest night crawler. White bread wouldn't do it, but a ball of cornmeal might. It wouldn't be tempted by regular flies, but a monarch butterfly might be where its color came from. No one knew who actually saw it, but everyone and their fishing poles were on the lookout for this rarest of the Raritan fishes.

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"Run home now, quick!" screams Beat, her brunette bangs flashing in the sunlight as she splashes back downstream pointing up on the hillside. "The Needers are coming."

"Faster Wiley, faster," calls Beulah, waving him over to the hidden path back to Hanken Road as a rock whizzes past.

When the three of them are finally back in their yard Beat calls a huddle.

"Don't tell anyone about the cave," she breathlessly begins. "We don't want to have to share the loot."

"What about the golden carp?" asks Beulah, shaking her head to agree with keeping the treasure a secret.

"What golden carp?" Beat retorts with a wink.



## Chapter 4: Fort Pear

"I'm going over to the pear trees to build a fort with Keety," explains Beat, scarfing a hammer and saw from the aluminum tool shed as Beulah and Wiley watch, wooed over by the screech of the sliding door. "You little kids stay here."

"We can help," Beulah offers while grabbing a handful of rusty nails from a hardware box in the corner. "We'll bring some wood from under the house and go get whatever you need."

"It's too dangerous," Beat persists despite four pleading eyes, "but you can feed the snappers while I'm gone."

"What do they eat?" queries Beulah, excited by the idea of taking care of the two humongous turtles in their blue plastic kiddie pool.

"Try anything - grass, lilacs, bees, worms, lettuce from the garden, bologna from the fridge, an apple," Beat instructs as she's heading across the yard. "Just don't let mom see you taking things."

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The snapping turtles had arrived the previous day by bicycle messenger. Thirteen-year-old Blaine and a friend had caught them in the swimming hole below the spillway at Willows Pond in the neighboring town of Middlesex. The two boys were quite the sight riding the two miles home up Route 28 with Blaine on the seat holding out a squirming snapper by the tail in each hand as his friend steered while standing on the pedals.

Arriving with tails intact and arms trembling from the weight, Blaine deposited them into the first available container, a new PVC kiddie pool Mr. Reed had just brought home for the little kids. Adding a few rocks and some water from the hose, Blaine built a turtle shelter that he promptly forgot, taking off on his bike again the next morning.

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"Those Needers won't be able to get us up here," Beat calls down from a crook up among the white and pink flowers in the tallest of the old pear trees.

"Nope, and we'll pelt them with pears in the fall," Keety answers from below as the April wind showers his armload of scrap planks with fetid pear petals.

"Look out!" Beat yells as a sudden gust sways the branch where the hammer is hanging.

Keety drops to the ground screaming, blood dripping from a hand over his mouth.

A neighbor woman runs over and jams a washcloth into the empty sockets of his two front teeth as Beats scurries down.

"What happened?" the woman asks when the flow and his whimpering ebb.

"An accident," he begins and then glimpses Beat slinking away between the houses. "I fell."

"Well thank Jesus and Mother Mary you didn't break your neck," she exclaims, making the sign of the cross before helping him up.

## Chapter 5: The Lilac Bush

"Keety and Beaty sitting in a tree," sings Leo Mazurkewicz as the two older kids duck under a lilac overflowing with violet flower stalks.

"Shut up, you little punk," Beat calls, sticking her head out of the thicket, "or I'll drop a hammer on your head too."

She glares at the pouting five-year-old slinking away until he disappears between the houses. Then she turns back into the overgrown hedge.

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The lilac bush is leftover from the original Hanken farmhouse that was razed to finish the cul-de-sac portion of the Downs Manor subdivision. With a hidden clearing behind a rim of stalks of varying thicknesses, the old shrub had become a secret meeting place unknown to the adults of the neighborhood.

After the hammer mishap the two nine-year-olds had abandoned plans to build a fort in one of the old pear trees. Now they were plotting the defense of the neighborhood from command headquarters in the lilac bush.

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"Let's pry open a manhole and make a pit to trap them," enthuses Keety, already turning to go find a branch to use as a pry bar.

"That won't work," Beat reasons to slow him down. "They've never actually come down this street."

"Then we'll send Leo and Beulah to bike past the Kluzaks and lead them back."

"Here's a better idea: That golden carp will call them in and we'll nail them with rocks from the hillside."

"Good one Beat. Only thing is we don't know where the golden carp is."

"Maybe you don't know where it is, dipshit."

## Chapter 6: The Spirit of the Waters

"We'll wave our arms to herd it downstream," Beat coaches Wiley and Leo as the three of them line up across the brook just north of the bridge. "Beulah, Keety, and Kate will follow up on the bank and pelt them if they come."

"Fuck yeah," Leo agrees as skinny Wiley shivers in the cold stream running down from springs tucked back into Watchung hillsides.

"Don't you be hurting that fish," a big black teenager calls down from the metal guardrail. "Gramps say she'll bring a century of floods."

"We won't," Beat waves back after doing a double-take, and she waits until he's gone before ordering "ready, set, go!"

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This was the first golden carp any of the kids had ever seen. Hearing whisperings among their children, most adults thought it was a goldfish that had outgrown its bowl and was released into the brook. Old time fishermen figured it was just a more vividly colored fry of the massive carp they knew were in deeper holes of the Raritan. The ancient people of the region, the Lenape, knew this rare fish from their former range in the northern Ohio valley where their ancestors had a clan named for it. Whatever it was and wherever it came from, the Middlebrook golden carp was about to find its fate.

Bound Brook was an old Dutch borough founded in 1682. By 1962 the town had its share of Italians and eastern Europeans for work at mills and factories along the Raritan. African Americans, however, hadn't yet forded the boundary waters from the more open surrounding towns. It was a rare and talked about event to see a black person in town except going to and from the regional high school.

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"What you got?" demands Jimmy Needer stepping from behind a sycamore as Beat and the boys stop mid-splash.

"Nothing, just playing," Beat answers, glancing up at the bank beside lower Tea Street.

"We chase them away," he nods to that same bank and then looks downstream. "I see orange."

"Okay Jimmy," Beat concedes before recovering and insisting "we're herding the golden carp back to the river where it belongs."

"We help," he smiles, waving his brothers and sister over from the woods.

## Chapter 7: May Day Parade

"It's N-e-d-j-e-r," declares a tall girl as she and Beat follow the other Roadies and Needers splashing down the Middlebrook, "and I'm Nadia."

"Pleased to meet you, Nadia N-e-d-j-e-r," smiles Beat glancing sideways at the older girl's svelte legs shimmering in the mid-morning sunlight beaming through the crystalline water. "Beatrice R-e-e-d at your service."

"Little ones over tracks," calls Jimmy pointing to a barely discernible dirt path up to the railroad trestle after touching a wooden beam to make sure no trains are coming. "Swimmers under."

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April had given way to May in the year of the golden carp, and the child gangs of the west end were turning into teenagers led by a surprising newcomer. The Nedjers were political refugees fleeing Prague after the 1960 communist makeover of constitution, flag, and state symbols of the old Czech Republic. Jimmy had grown up on the bohemian streets of one of eastern Europe's oldest cities and was well positioned to broker the ethnic rivalries of a diminutive New Jersey town. A tall, strong twelve-year-old, he was also capable of the physical negotiations required for traversing Bound Brook's tough neighborhoods.

Even the polluted waterways of the industrial Cold War suburbs hadn't prepared Jimmy for what he was wading towards. The Raritan valley with unregulated development and proximity to New York ports had become the birthplace of the American petrochemical industry. The companies lining the banks with their effluent pools read like a who's who of the worst workplace environmental disasters: Calco's aniline dyes (American Cyanamid); Ruberoid's roofing shingles (GAF); Bakelite's plastics (Union Carbide); Johns Manville's asbestos products. By mid-twentieth century the Raritan ran in various sheens after any significant rain, as occurred each spring and with periodic tropical depressions coming up the coast.

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"*The linden was burning, burning,*" Jimmy sings as the smaller kids rejoin the splashers lined up across the Middlebrook. "*The linden was burning, burning.*"

"*My sweetheart was under it, my sweetheart was under it,*" joins in Nadia from behind, smiling over at Beat as the creek reaches her waist with the approach of the point.

"Hey!" shout the rest of the Nedjers and the whole family joins the chorus of the Czech folk song as Beat, Keety, and their siblings listen entranced:

*"Water flows down from above,  
Swift like me,  
It turns around,  
Around a maple tree.  
Water flows down from above,  
Swift like me,  
It turns around,  
Around a maple tree."*

With a final splash of twenty arms, Jimmy and Beat catch a flash of gold streaking into the amaranthine Raritan, never again to be seen in the clear waters flowing down from the Watchung hills.



## Chapter 8: Chesterfield

"You and Jimmy seem close," Beat observes from her perch atop a rock retaining wall, handing over a cigarette stolen from her father's carton of Chesterfield kings.

"Twins," Nadia exhales, her word accompanied by a stream of harsh, sweet smoke as they dangle legs above the tinkling stream. "He's thirteen, I'm twelve."

"Happy birthday Jimmy!" Beat laughs, quickly deducing how twins could have different ages.

"Yeah, big boy at 11:12, little girl at 12:13," Nadia explains while pointing her cigarette toward the little kids digging into the shale bank below. "There's treasure under that rockslide?"

"Nah," Beat replies taking a slow drag, "I just made that up to keep them occupied."

"You are bad," laughs Nadia with a low guffaw that's interrupted by a clanging of rocks echoing from under the Union Avenue bridge.

"Oh shit, the Crescent Drive Kids," Beat whispers, snuffing out her smoke and starting down the wall. "Let's get out of here."

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Nadia and Beatrice weren't as well prepared as Jimmy Nedjer for navigating teenage life in 1960s Bound Brook. Young women were still steered into home economics and secretarial prep classes at the otherwise excellent high school. It wasn't until 1972 that Title IX granted equal access to sports and other educational opportunities, and it took about ten years to become a reality for most public schools. As free-spirited and nature loving pre-teens in a male dominated social structure, the two girls would either have to eek out an identity with little support or grin and bear it until they could get the hell out of there.

Mr. Reed's preferred cigarette brand had been an innovator in manufacturing and marketing. Dubious firsts included double lined packaging to preserve moisture, king sized cigarettes for longer smokes, and advertising to women to double the market. They were also the last brand to add filters, only doing so in 2019 when data was emerging, ironically, that heated plastic fibers in filters were as toxic as tars in the actual tobacco.

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"I'll show you how to handle boys," Nadia asserts, climbing down the rock wall and picking her way over boulders to the underpass.

Beat watches in stunned silence as her new friend leans into the tall leader, whispering into his ear before he waves the gang back to their side of the bridge.

"What did you say to him?" Beat queries as they lead their little siblings in the midday sun across the steaming blacktop of the now fully paved Tea Street to the Dairy Queen.

"I tell him 'Go away or I tell Jimmy you felt my chest'," her lips tickling Beat's ear with each consonant.

"Talk about bad," Beat concludes, shaking two more Chesterfields out of the soft pack as the children clambor around a wooden picnic table, "but here's to the feeling of chests!"