

## **Route 66 Sweetheart**

### **Chapter One: Here I Am!**

To Marian, growing up in northeastern New Jersey just across the Hudson River from New York City, the important things in life seemed either very far away or almost too close. What mattered was out of reach or suffocating. She could find little middle ground.

Marian's father had not been sent "over there" during World War I because she and her two older siblings, John and Ella, had been born by 1917. But Curtis was profoundly affected by that historic conflict. And he was away from home frequently during the years his children were growing up (in addition to Marian, there would be two more, Alice and Bill).

Curtis Lacy rode the train to work in Manhattan every weekday. And, as a marine insurance adjuster, he often traveled to coastal and river cities throughout the country. A few times he went overseas for months at a time. So, one of the most consistent images of Marian's childhood was the figure of her father disappearing down Ridge Road as he strode briskly toward the train station in early morning light. Away.

Mid's two sisters and two brothers, on the other hand, were so close at home they often seemed to stifle her. Not that she didn't love them (and the two grandparents who had lived with them in their widowhood), but if she'd had her own room (rather than sharing with Ella and Alice), or if she'd had some secret hideout like Judy Bolton in her favorite children's stories, she felt she could have maintained a better balance in her day-to-day affairs.

Her mother seldom left the house or its flower garden, but she often seemed distant. Marian assumed this was because Mrs. Ethel Lacy was thinking of grown-up things children

would not understand. What her mother was contemplating would become clear only years later, however, at the time of her father's unexpected death.

The middle Lacy child also couldn't know for more than a decade that the man who would become the father of her children was half a continent away, moving with his carpenter father and school teacher mother from job to job in a Midwest hard hit by the Depression. They would not live in the same city until well after she became a 66 Sweetheart.

Marian's sense that she had either to get away from a crowded house or find a retreat deeper within it was made most distinct one summer day in the 1930s. Her older brother, John, was a student at M.I.T, coming home only on occasional weekends. The next in age, Ella, considered the family beauty, was being courted by high school classmates and a few college men, so the three younger siblings often played together in the evenings.

While Marian, Alice, and Bill were having a three-handed cribbage tournament, their mother was sitting on the sofa organizing family pictures into a new album.

"Mother?" Mid asked. "What's that?" The question was, she thought, rhetorical. Every time her mother arranged photos, the topic of Ethel's lost brother surfaced. And she would tear up.

"It's Uncle Henry, isn't it?" Alice whispered to Marian.

"Muggins!" exclaimed Bill. Alice had failed to count his nobs, but it wasn't clear that she'd finished totaling her score.

Marian intervened, putting a hand on Bill's shoulder and pulling him toward her. "That's not fair; we were talking to Mother. Mother, what is that picture?"

Ethel did have her characteristic faraway look, and her eyes were moist. Marian assumed she was thinking of Henry, their uncle who had disappeared more than a dozen years earlier. A bachelor at thirty-five, he'd gone on a business trip to Canada and never returned. There were stories in the papers of a train wreck outside Toronto, and the family came to believe he must have been aboard. But the fact that nothing could be confirmed inspired a number of stories.

"No, Alice. It's not my brother." Like most mothers, she could somehow understand her children's whispering. "It's about Mid," she explained.

"Me? Let me see." All three climbed up from the rug, Bill trying to push past Alice.

"That's not a picture," he noted.

"It's a poem, a poem about your sister."

"Let us read it!" commanded Alice.

But Ethel tucked the folded paper back into the album. "Let me tell you about it instead." She pulled Bill close. The sisters settled themselves on two wingback chairs. "You were too young to remember, but one summer Marian got very, very sick."

"That time I had the flu?"

"Yes. At least, that's what we thought it was. Then Dr. Paterson did this test--a blood test of some kind, I think. Two days later he gave us bad news: leukemia. "

Alice gasped. "You die from that!"

"Yes, you do. There was no treatment for it then, and there's none now either."

"The test must have been wrong," said Bill. "Here she is!"

"Here I am, yes," mused Marian. This year in biology class she had been introduced to a microscope. She would use many more in her ten-year career as a medical technologist, finding

and drawing such tiny creatures that--though less than a foot from her careful eye--they seemed to exist in another, faraway universe. She imagined Dr. Paterson studying her blood, finding oddly shaped cells, a sign of destiny.

"I remember that summer. We were getting ready to go to the lake when I got so sick I couldn't get out of bed."

The family had a campsite on Greenwood Lake where they stayed from early summer until school began again in the fall, though Curtis had to commute into the city every weekday.

"Not so many had flu that year, not like it had been in 1918 or '19, but you were just as ill."

"I remember the war was over, though there were ever so many wounded and sick soldiers. Anyway, I do know that Doctor Paterson said I had to rest. I went to bed, and you put away all our camping equipment."

"It was weeks before you were well. We were never sure what your condition was, though it couldn't have been leukemia. And we even went to the lake after all. We got there just in time for Fourth of July. What a celebration! Fireworks over the water, and . . . "

"And?"

"Well, Dr. Paterson came to visit our campsite. It was just two tents back then. But the doctor brought me a present. Or perhaps it was for Father. They were fast friends."

"A keepsake?"

"You could say that--the poem." She patted the album. "He wrote a lot of poems. They tell me he's become pretty well known, especially in Europe. But I never could understand them. The things he wrote were just . . . sort of like snapshots, a picture of some scene."

"Was the poem about Mid, then?" asked Alice.

"It told about the whole family, our going to the lake. In the poem a little child is sick, and then she seems to die and rise up as some kind of angel."

"She doesn't act like an angel now," argued Bill.

Their mother laughed. "No, but neither do you, young man. Now, back to your game. I've got things to do in the kitchen." She rose, taking the album with her.

Sensing finality in this statement, Marian herded her younger siblings back to the rug, and the game resumed. But as she played, she tried to imagine the poem's words. She pictured herself as the child in the poem, an indistinct figure kept at a distance for some reason by her mother. It was a shadowy figure, a ghost of a girl perhaps.

When she'd been sick, she'd drifted in and out of dreams, rising and falling from restless sleep. The real world had seemed far away then--her older brother and sister at play in another room, neighbors strolling past on a Sunday afternoon, distant trains rolling north and south. She didn't know where she was or where she was supposed to be.

She had trouble putting it into words, but her mother's withdrawal also left Mid drifting. At times she felt cut off from both parents. Had Ethel Lacy been changed by the scare of that summer? Who had she been before she married Curtis and began to have children? Was there more to the story of her uncle's disappearance? How did Mid fit into this family history?

The four-year-old Mid, sick in bed, was now far away from the teenaged Marian, more like another person than herself at an earlier age. In a sense, Mid realized, that child had died. Once recovered and coming home from the lake, Marian had felt different, wise in some way children were not supposed to be and sad about the gap in her existence, the period of illness.

The girl in the poem--who was she? Marian before she got sick? The self she had become at age seventeen? An entirely different person she must still bring into being? At that moment she realized that her true self could be in the future, away and beckoning. She would have to search for that woman, outside this house or inside her imagination. She could begin tomorrow.

. . . to be continued.