



Routes 1&9

Ivan Robertson

Part of a series of short stories “Routes 1&9” by Ivan Robertson. Produced by Tommy Weir of Janey Pictures.

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Harry Truman

This was right after my brother died, a long time ago now. He died in March and it was that same summer, so it must've been 1954? Yes, 1954. God, what an awful time. Do you know I just found out what he died from? Isn't that dreadful?

You did?

Yes, my own brother. For years I thought he had caught something off an old stick, that he had picked up some stick somewhere and caught something and died, but of course it wasn't that at all...

That was in "The Blob". That was the old man in "The Blob".

Was it?

Yeah. Steve McQueen.

Oh. Well, I was just a little girl anyway. I couldn't have been nine.

Sure.

But it was an awful time. My mother was so grief-stricken. I mean, just paralytic with grief. Everybody would have been, of course, but her most of all. She just couldn't move. My father would come home from the store - he managed a furniture store in Bowling Green - and our house would be quiet as a cave. All the lights would be off and our dinners

would be thawing in the sink. And Mother would just sit there in the kitchen, in the dark, smoking cigarettes and listening to Paul Harvey on the radio.

Paul Harvey.

Yes, remember him? He used to be on the radio all the time. Remember? "And Here's The Rest Of The Story" he used to say. Mother loved Paul Harvey.

I don't remember.

Well, you're too young. But, listen. One night The Captain - we used to call my father The Captain, from the war - one night he came home and took matters into his own hands. "Helen," he said. "Pack your bags. We're moving to San Jose and we're leaving tomorrow."

That must've been quite a shock.

Oh, it was. It really was. At first my mother said "No, Sir." She wasn't going and she didn't appreciate the surprise, thank you very much. But The Captain was a stubborn man. He had to be.

Uh-huh.

From the war, from the Second World War. He was stationed out in the Pacific and he'd seen some terrible things. He had a shoe box full of things...

Things?

Well, anyway, The Captain had made his mind up and that was that. We were moving to San Jose. He had it all plotted out, he was always so thorough. He'd chartered out our route in a brand new Road Atlas and we were going tomorrow, like it or lump it.

What kind of things?

Listen. So the next morning we left, and it sure was a long trip. We went along Route 66, we actually did. The Captain would stop off at these dingbat places, I don't know how he found them all. You know that song, "Get your kicks on Route 66?"

Sure. Chuck Berry.

Was it? Well, we saw all sorts of things. Mystery Spots in the Ozarks, Mammoth Caves, all that stuff. We saw a mummified Cherokee princess in Arkansas, I remember, and she was so beautiful. Route 66 is all gone now, I guess. People fly everywhere. The one thing The Captain really wanted to see, though, was the Harry Truman Museum.

The Captain was a Truman man?

Well, Truman ended the war of course.

Right.

But I think he just wanted to see it. It had just opened and it was in all the papers. So we drove up to Independence, Missouri - it's just a suburb outside of Kansas City - and got

directions at the local filling station. At first we thought we were lost, it was just a house in a neighborhood. It was just his old house. This boxy little house with a flag pole in the yard. And it wasn't even open.

That's too bad.

Oh, The Captain was furious. His face went red as a beet and he yelled "Wait here!" Just like that. He made Mother and me wait there on the porch. He drove off in the car, he was so mad. He was punching the steering wheel and everything. Mother and I waited on that porch, they had a porch swing, and we rocked back and forth. We didn't know what to do, we didn't know where The Captain went. We didn't really know what to do.

Jesus.

I know. I know. We must've waited on that porch for an hour, at least. Maybe two. And the sun was really beating down on us. It was a hot, hot day and we sat there swinging in the porch swing. You know that song "You'd be so nice to come home to"? Mother sang that song over and over. I put my head in her lap and she ran her hand over my hair. Do you know that song? "You'd be so nice, you'd be paradise..."

Maybe. I think so.

I had to pee once and Mother took me around to the side of the house. I remember peeing in the dirt. "You'd be so nice to

come home to, So nice by the fire..." I closed my eyes and she sang. So eventually, after at least an hour and maybe two, The Captain pulled up in front of the Museum. We had a big black Buick. We could see that there was another man, sitting in the car next to him. They sat in the car for a few minutes, talking but not moving, and then they got out, The Captain and the other man. We could see right away that The Captain had gotten the other man out of bed. He was wearing white pants and a white shirt and his suspenders were all turned around. He was cleaning his glasses with his shirt.

Who was he?

Well, he was President Truman. He followed the captain up to the porch with a big set of keys in his hands and he nodded to us. He was very polite. "Ladies," he called us.

It was Truman? Are you sure?

I was standing right next to him. I shook his hand. I remember the pores in his nose and everything. I remember he smelled like mints. He found the right key and he unlocked the door to his Museum. He turned on the lights, and it was just his house. He showed us his living room and his old piano. He showed us his dining room table. There were all sorts of pictures on the walls. Pictures of Truman holding up that funny newspaper, pictures of Truman with Lauren Bacall, pictures of Truman with Roosevelt and pictures of Truman with Joe DiMaggio. I think his typewriter

was there, and his hat stand. I don't really remember. I do remember that he said he liked the house, though. That he and Bess always liked that house.

He did?

That's what he said. When the tour was over we left. He stood there on the porch and waved and we drove away. He was a nice man. People think I'm crazy when I tell them that story but I'm not. It's true, every word.

I don't think you're crazy.

You're sweet.

No, I'm not. Not for a long time.

Yes, you are. I can tell. You're a sweet, sweet man.

"OK."

Harry Truman from ***Routes 1&9***, a collection of short stories.

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