

From Route 66 Kids  
By Michael Lund  
Second in the Route 66 Novel Series

Prologue: Stolen By Gypsies

**Happiness is something one can't explain. You must take my word for it. Troubles enough came afterward, but there was that summer, high and blue, a life in itself.**

Willa Cather, The Professor's House

Nothing was more exciting in my Midwestern childhood than the announcement that something had been spotted coming over the horizon, an object or objects seen above the distant line of rolling Ozark hills when we were out in the open or above the more immediate tree line within our neighborhood.

It might have been a low flying plane, dropping leaflets across town, a flock of birds on their annual migration, or the low rolling bank of storm clouds bringing snow. But no matter what the cause, whenever one kid called out and pointed to the sky, the rest of us felt our pulses quicken and anticipation mount.

Nothing exceeded the sense of childhood promise--tinged, I must admit, with a touch of embarrassment--caused by the aerial sighting Billy Rhodes and I experienced one lazy Sunday afternoon late in August. The two of us were lying on our backs on the unshingled roof of a new house under construction on Ridgeview Road, an extension to the south of the Circle proper.

"The Circle" was what we called our neighborhood, a name derived from the configuration of three streets--Limestone, Oak, and Hill--that connected in a kind of elongated loop on the western edge of this small town in south-central Missouri.

Billy and I were in the midst of one of those typical teenage boy talks about sex.

"Think about Marcia Terrell's lips," commands Billy.

"OK, I'm thinking about them," I respond. Marcia catches her lower lip in her teeth when she's worried, and I generate considerable pleasure in my contemplation of kissing them.

We were not supposed to be on this rooftop, of course. This is a three-quarters finished house, with framing, plumbing, and wiring complete and a tar papered roof above. But none of the carpenters was there on Sunday, so we were ignoring any unspoken prohibition that would have been expected from our parents.

From our present vantage point, three town landmarks are visible: the regional hospital, a two-story beige brick building about three quarters of a mile due north; the massive red brick and sandstone Phipps County courthouse only half a mile to the east; and the impressive four-story Banner Hotel, famous Route 66 establishment perched on a ridge clear on the other side of town. (You'll learn the history of the Banner Hotel later.)

"Think about Sheila Knight's hair," says Billy. And I do that too. Hair is a turn-on for Billy, so I know he's getting excited about this project in fantasy.

"Umm!" I offer, willing to see where this is leading. I decide not to let on to Billy that I'm thinking

about more of Sheila than her hair. Though still a teenager, she has a woman's full body.

I called parental instruction "unspoken" a minute ago because this is a feature of our current, mid-adolescent stage. Fathers and mothers around the Circle, it has occurred to us, have at last given up repeating the rules they expect us to go by: "be home for dinner; stay away from the railroad tracks; don't play rough with girls."

Of course, this change could be as much in us as in our parents. That is, we might no longer be hearing my father assigning regular and odd chores or my mother announcing limits and prohibitions. Growing boys with hormones surging and rebellion in our bones, we could have been consciously or unconsciously turning deaf ears to whatever our parents dictated.

"Think of Cathy Williams' legs, and, oh, that sweet rear end!"

This isn't hard because our legendary neighborhood beauty has legs, as we used to say, without knowing exactly what we meant, 'that go all the way up!'

"Think of Patricia Stewart's knockers."

This too is no challenge, as her chest, just arrived from Texas, is, as you'll learn later, remarkable.

I understand at this age, by the way, about how lips, legs, and knockers are all linked in the process of human reproduction, that eternal event that continues the human race. I think I even know, as I'll explain, the specific event that led to my own appearance on this planet. Of course, Billy's instructions right now fit within a different context--idle pleasure.

Certainly, I understand, though, that kids derive biologically from parents: my friends and I are the sons and daughters of the generation that survived the Depression and World War II, the "Big One," as we've heard from our earliest days.

We don't, however, fully understand how we are the kids of other things too, forces and events that shape our destiny and will give us the name "Babyboomers." It might be a little like the "stolen by gypsies" tale.

In that ancient formulation, a young man or woman, having known no other family since infancy, grows up as a member of the adopting group. However, the young gypsy realizes that he or she doesn't quite fit in. The boy doesn't want to steal chickens from the farmer's barn; the girl wants to read books instead of wash clothes along the riverbank. Their true identities cannot be hidden forever, and at the end the hero/heroine discovers an origin, true parents.

I didn't feel like this often as a young child, nor, I think, did many of my generation. So satisfied were most of us with our lot in Middle America in the 1950s that to desire anything different was almost impossible.

Oh, of course, there were exceptions. Raymond Guthrie was convinced he was the unacknowledged son of St. Louis Cardinal great, Stan Musial And Patricia Montgomery just knew that she was Princess Grace of Monaco's forgotten little sister, abandoned somehow when the movie star left Hollywood.

Several decades later I would even come to understand that there were whole groups of the disenfranchised in our midst all those years. White Anglo Saxon Protestants like me were just pretty good at not seeing them.

Still, by and large, most of the kids I knew figured we were who we were, ordinary folks destined eventually to take our small parts in the large scheme of things. And I was no different from the rest: Mark Landon, second son of Richard and Susan Landon of Limestone Drive, moving steadily and unspectacularly through grade school, junior high, and high school on the road to a productive if conventional adulthood.

There were some stray moments along the way of a dozen years or so in which the constructs that held me securely seemed suddenly to shake loose and reveal completely unpredicted alternatives, selves I had never until those moments imagined I could be. I might have been stolen by gypsies.

And now I realize it could be said I was born of social systems and intellectual structures that also contained my father and mother, my older brother and younger sister. I might have been, one might say, a child of Route 66, that famous highway representing westward expansion and the idea of a better America.

Route 66 ran just north of our neighborhood on the other side of the Missouri Pacific railroad tracks, which lay at the bottom of the Cut. The highway had passed through town for many years, but one of the recent phases leading to Eisenhower's national system of interstate highways meant the building of a bypass around town for through traffic.

In the chapters that follow you'll hear more about the local reasons for such a bypass and how that change reflects altered hopes and dreams for people like me. And you may conclude that all of us growing up in the Circle are "Route 66 Kids" as much as we are the children of individual parents.

Now, did I mention that at least one of the two boys on that Ridgeview rooftop is feeling a bit crowded in his pants at this moment? No, I guess I didn't.

Well, we're lying on our backs on a slanted roof, remember. And there is gravity. So our bodies are probably sliding earthward, and some things we're wearing are riding up.

Then Billy asks all of a sudden, "Why is it so dark?"

"I don't know!" It is dark; we're suddenly in shadow.

Both of us crane our heads backwards, to the south where the sun sits high. And we both see the same thing: a huge hot air balloon, flame orange, sweeping majestically over the tree line no higher than one hundred feet above us. The giant bag rising from the tiny basket is another hundred feet tall, and the whole thing has cast us in momentary shadow.

It's not really the balloon that has mesmerized us, of course, but the couple in the basket below.

In my adult memory's picture of her, the woman in the basket combines Marcia Terrell's lips, Sheila Knight's hair, Kathy Williams' legs, and Patricia Stewart's bosom. She is stunning.

"Look!" I gasp. Billy responds, "Ah!"

The man in the basket, whose arm rests comfortably across the woman's shoulder, has the lips, hair, legs, and chest I expect to have in the future. He too is gorgeous.

This couple represent, I realize at once, my future--daring adventure, thrilling romance, the achievement of great things. I will travel, I will fall in love (and be fallen in love with), I will become famous.

Billy instantly grasps this concept as appropriate to his own destiny as well, and we lie enraptured of this sight and our own prospects. The grand pair glides over the Circle, crosses Route 66, and drifts lazily north-northwest.

Before that, the two riders had looked down at us, this pair from heaven. Turning in the basket, they saw, I understand decades later, two goofy teenage boys lying spread eagled on a rooftop and up to . . . well, let's just say, up to no good.

Before they are out of sight, Billy and I will convince ourselves that they couldn't really have seen us very clearly, that they wouldn't have had time to decipher what they observed. They were probably just viewing the neighborhood in general, more interested, we're sure, in each other than in the ordinary world below them.

And who, you ask, was this flying couple crossing America, perhaps following Route 66 to California? Gentle reader, I wish I could tell you. In fact, one of the reasons I'm writing this continuation of my life story is to see if anyone out there can answer this question. While a number of other people later remarked on the event, I at least never found an explanation of who the balloonists were or why they would have been journeying on that particular day. They remain a mystery.

Other pieces of my universe, however, did come together in meaningful patterns in those years of my growing up, years when the world was an open book for me and my friends to read and come to understand. It didn't happen all at once, of course. But many a day brought a flash of insight into the workings of adulthood, for gypsies and for children in their own families.

So I close this prologue with the image of something coming over the horizon because it stands even now for that great happiness of childhood, summer high and blue. Such a serendipitous event catches us by surprise, forecasting pleasure, companionship, genuine fulfillment--all things I hope for you in the pages that follow.

Mark Landon

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