

# Reflections: A Sentimental Journey

Oct. 13, 1943

Dear Will,

The family came  
empty plate and  
grace and reme  
pray you are well

It has been weeks  
say it has been real  
you terribly and lon  
much longer? Wou  
with us by Christma  
this year.

In the lonely nights I  
your touch and quiet words as the ocean waves crashed upon  
the shore. Whenever I visit the seashore I recall that late  
August night.

All my love,



assisted we put an  
le asked to say  
we all did. I do

ter, needless to  
family. We miss  
in this war last  
ould be home  
at miracle

remember our moments alone,  
as the ocean waves crashed upon  
I recall that late

All my love,

## Reflections A Sentimental Journey

Nancy M. Wade

# PREVIEW

## Chapter 1

I was hanging a basket of freshly laundered clothes to dry the first time I saw Johnny Bateman. My apron pockets bulged with wooden clothes pins and I had just finished hanging a row of cloth diapers that waved like small pennants in the wind. I held one pin between my teeth as I carefully arranged the shoulder seams of a thin cotton dress across the rope clothesline, then pinned it in place. The hot sun warmed my skin; I could feel drops of perspiration dot my forehead and shoved damp tendrils of long black hair back under my kerchief. I fought to hold the frayed but clean bed sheets on the line as they flapped in the strong summer breeze. When I turned around, I paused in my labors to gaze into the handsomest face I had ever seen, staring right back at me from across the top of the wooden stockade fence. I couldn't help but be intrigued by his rugged features and nonchalant manner.

Our back yard on Central Avenue joined his Tioga Street rear property, cutting the distance between our two Camden City streets in half. Even though my family was new to the block, I knew who he was. Everyone knew of the Bateman family; they were well respected in the neighborhood. Mrs. Bateman was a hard worker; I saw her daily as she weeded her small garden or scrubbed the marble front stoop of their brick row house. She rarely spoke to anyone, although occasionally on warm days when she sat outside, I could hear her reciting the Rosary and her daily prayers. The Bateman family members, and there were many, followed the doctrines of strict German Catholics. I had met one of the girls who was close to my age, but since they didn't attend the same school as my sisters and I and we didn't go to Sacred Heart church, our paths rarely crossed.

I could tell he watched me as I went about my chores and although my curiosity was up. I certainly didn't want to appear

brazen by speaking to him first, so I smiled shyly and waited for him to make a move, but none came. I moved between the two rows of wet clothes and when I turned to peek again, he had gone. Just as well, I thought; if I didn't get these clothes hung to dry while the sun was high, my mother would tan my hide.

Being the oldest sure had its difficulties; babies to feed and runny noses to wipe, beds to make and dishes to wash. I always had to lend a hand around the house because my mother worked long hours cleaning other peoples' homes to earn our keep. I could see how tired she was as she dragged her feet home at night and then had to care for all of us – five more mouths to feed in tough Depression years. So, I tried not to complain but I missed just being a girl with time to dream or the chance to be courted.

The hot summer months had flown by and now with Labor Day just three days away it meant the start to another school year. I watched the clouds float across the deep blue sky and let my mind wander with them as my hands toiled. I sighed and wondered if ninth grade might be my last year at Evered School. I'd heard talk that the city might close the school anyway and then I would have to walk the longer distance to Wilson High and that would surely seal my fate. My mother had hinted that I might have to quit school and go to work full time anyway.

I know she's worried and we don't always have enough food in the house. A heavy-set woman, stern expression on her face, came by last week to speak with Mama. The formidable official inspected our house and poked in the cupboards; I guess she was trying to find dirt or rodents or some evidence to hold over my mother. She was disappointed when she didn't find anything. Our house might be poor but it's spic and span clean. I heard her threaten that the two youngest, Eddie and Ethel, could be sent to the state hospital at Lakewood for a while because of being malnourished. I laid in bed late that night listening to my mother cry; grieving about her babies being taken away.

I hate this Depression, never enough money or food; it feels like the whole world is suffering. I know we sure are. I listen to the radio when President Roosevelt talks to the country and I try

to understand his New Deal and what that means to folks, but it's been four years since he took office and I don't see our life improving.

Maybe things would have been better if my father had not abandoned us last year. My mother doesn't talk about it; she won't speak his name or allow us to even ask about our father. All I know is that one day he left the house and never came back. I heard a neighbor gossiping about my parents and pretended not to listen, but she spoke so loudly that I think she intended me to hear her cruel barbs about how Thomas Smith had left his family to run off and join a circus.

A circus... how exciting that must be. I wish I could see a circus with all the animals and performers, the bright colors and sounds; it must be thrilling to be part of something like that, but why did he leave us behind? Didn't he love us anymore? I cried and cried when he first left; he used to call me daddy's little princess and I thought I was special. I guess I'm not. Anyway, I've stopped crying and even the younger children don't ask about him anymore.

The sound of flapping sheets brought my attention back to the chore at hand. I finished hanging the laundry and propped the wooden clothes pole under the rope line to keep the sheets from dragging on the ground; the bleached white sheets and clothes would dry in no time.

I placed my basket next to the back door where I could retrieve it later and walked into the kitchen to check on the babies. Thank goodness, the older girls, Millie and Claire, played at a friend's house today; two less kids to worry about.

Little Ethel sat in her high chair still occupied with picking feathers from her fingers. That was a trick mother often used to keep the baby busy while she did her chores; just smear some honey on the baby's fingers and put two or three feathers in the sticky sweet stuff and she'll sit for an hour trying to remove them. I had to laugh as I watched her.

Eddie crawled around the kitchen linoleum floor pushing his little wooden car that father had carved for him. His face was as

dirty as his hands and it was clear he needed his britches changed. But at least he was behaving and not crying to be fed.

I smiled at the pair; sometimes I felt more like their mother than a sister. At the age of fifteen going on sixteen soon, I could be having my own babies. Some of my friends were already married and in the family way.

I grabbed a bar of soap and a wash rag and applied it to the mess on Ethel then turned the sudsy cloth to Eddie before I could think of feeding them lunch.

“I bet you two are hungry,” I said to the pair as I stirred the small pot of soup simmering on the stove and ladled a bowl for each of the children. It smelled good although I knew there wasn’t much chicken meat in that broth; mother had diced up as many carrots as she could to add into the egg noodles and seasoned stock. It would have to stretch to feed us all.

My mother had left ten cents on the table with instructions for me to walk to Snyder’s bakery in the next block and buy a loaf of bread. So as soon as we finished eating the soup I took the children on an outing.

They were both happy to sit in a small red wagon that I pulled down the street on my way to Snyder’s. We passed a line of bedraggled people waiting at the mission doorway and soup kitchen; all ages and manner of dress, grateful for a meager plate of food being shared. A woman stood on the corner selling apples from a basket that she clutched to her bosom. Sullen eyes stared into the distance; her ragged clothes, dirty hair and skin made her appear more aged than her years.

The streets of Camden were strewn with people just trying to survive. I had to carefully steer the wagon around several sleeping men huddled against cardboard boxes and make-shift shelters as I made my way down the block.

Just a few streets away, remains of “Hooverville” scrap metal and wooden shanties existed along the railroad tracks; indigent people, with no jobs and little food, using old newspapers for blankets in winter. It was a pitiful sight. Mother had cautioned us kids to stay away from the tracks; no sense asking for trouble

or putting ourselves in harm's way by tempting the desperate men that lived there.

I normally walked at a brisk pace and did so today with the wagon in tow behind me once I had a clear path. I was half way there when I heard a male voice and stopped.

"Hello. Need any help?"

To my surprise, Johnny Bateman walked out of a narrow alley and hopped over a short brick wall onto the sidewalk near us. He was even better looking up close with sandy blond hair and pale blue eyes. I reminded myself to close my mouth and not gape.

"My name's Johnny," he informed me as he took the wagon handle out of my hand and casually started walking ahead. "Where you off to?"

I managed to recover my tongue and mutter, "Umm... Snyder's. I'm Mariah Smith. My family lives behind yours." I instantly regretted my last remark thinking how stupid that sounded. Of course, he knew I lived behind him! Didn't he just see me two hours ago? God, I must sound like an idiot.

He grinned at me and nodded, confirming my own thoughts that caused my face to flush and a wave of embarrassment rushed over me. Still, it was a nice smile and I couldn't help but smile back as we made our way to the bakery.

"I'll just be a second. Would you mind staying with the children while I go inside?" I asked him.

"Sure, go ahead," he answered as he reached for a pack of Camels and lit up a cigarette.

The bakery smelled like heaven as I closed the door; the little bell on top jingled as I entered. Aromas of warm bread and cinnamon sweet rolls floated in the air and made my mouth water as I waited my turn. Glass cases held buttery pound cakes and frosted cupcakes to tempt the affluent shopper.

The lady behind the counter turned her attention to me as I asked, "May I have one loaf of white bread please?"

She placed a loaf of the still warm bread in a paper bag and twisted the open end of the bag closed as she handed it across the counter. "That will be nine cents."

I pulled the thin dime from my pocket and placed it in her hand. She gave me my penny change and I carefully returned it to my pocket; checked for any holes, I couldn't afford to lose it, not even one cent. I clutched the bread and returned to Johnny Bateman waiting outside with the children.

"Want a smoke?" he asked as he offered me his pack of Camels.

"No thanks, I don't use 'em. It was nice of you to watch Eddie and Ethel. Hope they weren't any trouble."

"Nah, they're good kids."

"Well, I've got to get back home now," I told him as I took the wagon handle from his hand and proceeded to turn in the direction of Central Avenue.

I watched him stub out his cigarette butt on the cement sidewalk, the toe of his shoe ground the lit ash. He paused a moment as he came to some decision and then reached for my handle again and started pulling the wagon. He walked slowly alongside me as if we were out for a simple stroll in the park, instead of a noisy city street with horns beeping and the occasional pop of a car back firing.

"How come I haven't seen you around the neighborhood?" he wanted to know.

"I dunno, maybe 'cause I lived with my Aunt Mae for a while out in the country. The last three months my sisters, me and the babies were there so my mother could take a factory job, but she lost that, so we all came home. We just moved into this place a little while ago." I was embarrassed to have to explain to him about our living arrangements but at the same time I couldn't help but be pleased that he had noticed me.

"Going back to school next week?"

“Yes, are you? I’ll be in ninth grade, but it’s probably going to be my last year.”

“Nah, my old man says I gotta get a job now that I’m seventeen. There’s some jobs out there; that WPA program has put lots of people back to work. I think I can find something at the licorice works, McAndrew’s and Forbes. I’m hoping I can sign on as a helper and learn a trade. My Pop knows the foreman and he’s gonna try and get me in. They don’t pay much, but at least it’s a job and I can train to be a pipe fitter. Besides, it took me two years to finish eighth grade and that’s all the education I need to get by on.”

“Yeah, a lot of boys in my class have quit and are out searching for work. Still, someday, I hope my kids can go to school and graduate. I’d like to see my kids have a high school education better than me. There’s just got to be a better life,” I told him wistfully as I peered into the distance, trying to see the future and finding my crystal ball foggy.

We had reached my front door as I turned to Johnny and took back the wagon. Ethel had fallen asleep with her head in Eddie’s lap, but he didn’t seem to mind as he sucked his thumb and struggled to keep his own eyes open. I pressed my finger to my lips and pointed to the two sleepy heads; silently indicating the need for quiet.

Johnny smiled and nodded toward the door. I caught his meaning as I ran up the steps and got the door open as he carried in the two sleepy children.

“Where do you want them?” he asked.

I quickly spread an old quilt on the living room floor, creating a makeshift pallet.

“Here let me take Ethel from you. Can you lay Eddie down? Here’s a pillow for his head.”

The toddlers stirred slightly and returned to their slumber as I moved toward the door to see Johnny out.

“Can I see you again?” He paused with his hand on the doorknob, waiting for my reply.

“I’d like that, but I don’t have a lot of free time. I care for the little ones during the day while my mother works then I help her clean a few houses a couple days a week. Maybe next week after school starts again things will be different.”

“Yeah well, I’ll be seeing you.” He gave me a quick two finger salute and a wink as he walked away. His words echoed the refrain of one of my favorite songs and I smiled at the thought.