

Marion's Walk

A Twentieth Century American Family

By James Kelley

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Introduction

On December 13th, 1926 in the Port Richmond section of Philadelphia, Marion was born.

Marion's childhood experiences would set the tone for the workings of her entire life. She arrived into this world fighting and continued to do so until the day she died. A roller coaster childhood, a father abandoning her, an abusive stepfather, an alcoholic husband, losing two babies, and rearing ten children was a substantial load to carry in one lifetime. This story will guide you along Marion's Walk through life, with the passion, pain, joy and drama of a woman who fought with courage and tenacity to survive the most prolific century in history.

From the roaring twenties, though the depressed thirties, into the Second World War and beyond, Marion's Walk brings with it the fighting spirit of a girl, turned woman, who isn't easily intimidated by the perils of dysfunctional family life. Marion's naïve, but tough, exterior finds her in constant conflict, with a resilience that brings her out of each difficulty.

After being abandoned by her father in early adolescence, and surviving an abusive stepfather, Marion walks right into a volatile marriage with an alcoholic husband. She battles through 20 years of degradation, while losing two babies and nurturing ten others. Surviving a nervous breakdown, a crisis in faith, and chronic health problems, Marion's walk eventually leads her along a more peaceful path to salvation.

A must read for those going through their own tumult, and needing encouragement to keep walking forward. Take a stroll in Marion's Walk and gain strength with every twist and turn through a path that was survived by a woman of the greatest generation.

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Hitting Stride

The winter of 1953 was as cold as the summer of 52' was hot, with wind chills falling below zero after sunset. Mike felt the glacial air right down to his bones while walking home from a job he hated. However, on this evening the frigid weather did not faze him. He thought about sharing his good news with the family as he slid along icy sidewalks without fear. Mike knew it wouldn't be long before his old boots never had to make contact with the streets of the projects again.

"I have very good news for all of us," Mike announced at the dinner table.

"What's that Daddy?" Katie asked her father while picking at cold Spam and applesauce.

"We are moving out of the projects," Mike announced proudly!

"Woohoo - Yippee, yelled his children as their mother started to cry!

Mike fended off screeching children while observing his wife's expression. He couldn't tell if she was happy or sad. Marion sat in her seat; fork in hand, with tears streaming down her face. She leaned back in her chair and tilted her head while sobbing uncontrollably. Mike was confused by her reaction and came to her side.

"You're not happy we're leaving?" Mike asked his wife as he knelt by her side.

"Yes, yes," Marion stuttered, while gasping for air and moaning at her husband's display of sympathy.

"Than what?" Mike asked as he dabbed Marion's eyes with a paper napkin.

"I also have a piece of news to announce," Marion said as she composed herself.

"Oh no," Mike mumbled as he stood up and prepared for the worse.

"Hush children," Marion boomed at the kids parading around the fold up dinner table!

“What is it mommy?” Timmy asked his mother, fearing what his father had already surmised.

“I’m,” Marion tried to finish her statement before breaking down into a fit of tears again!

“Your what, mommy?” Katie asked her mother, while Colleen and Patrick continued to run around the room howling at the moon.

“I think what your mother is trying to say is – she’s going to have another baby,” Mike announced as he sat down.

“I’m sorry,” Marion cried, running into the bedroom!

“Why is mommy having another baby,” Timmy asked his father?”

“It must be what God wants for this family,” Mike said as he grabbed his two oldest, hugging them both.

“Why are you crying now, Daddy?” Katie asked as the two raucous children behind them settled down, coming to their father’s side.

“Because I’m happy I got a better job and that we are moving out of the projects, but I feel bad for your mother who is feeling sad right now.”

“What can we do to stop mommy from crying?” Colleen asked her father.

“Grab the babies, and all of you go cuddle with mommy on her bed,” Mike said as he started to clear the table. “And tell her how much you’re looking forward to another brother or sister.”

Mike's new job at the Dupont Chemical Corporation required a driver's license, as the company was located over twenty miles away in Delaware. Although he couldn't afford to purchase a car at this point, Mike was able to borrow a truck and move his family, and their meager belongings, temporarily to a small ranch house just a few miles away in Holmes, Pennsylvania. Six children, and another on the way, became a real challenge fitting all into this small ranch home nestled in the middle of another newly constructed suburb of Philadelphia. The housing industry was booming like never before, with new suburban developments popping up south and west of the city. The Murphy's were happy to be out of the Chester projects and into a safer neighborhood.

A much milder spring and summer allowed Marion and Mike to take full advantage of their spacious yard with cookouts that had extended family invited to their home again. Marion especially enjoyed organizing, preparing and entertaining guests. She focused much of her entertainment budget on children's parties, with big outdoor events for her three July babies. As the family income grew, so did the budget, with Marion overspending on the frivolous in the pursuit of making everyone around her happy. A few good months were followed by a double dose of reality that rattled the walls of their small rancher in the southern suburbs of Philly.

"Hello," Mike said as he answered the phone.

"Hi, is this the Murphy residence?" a hospital nurse asked.

"Yes it is, who's calling?"

"Mr. Murphy, your wife just gave birth to twins!"

Mike dropped the phone. He couldn't believe his ears. "It couldn't be," he thought while the voice on the other end of the phone was asking if anyone was still there. "It just couldn't be," he thought again as he left the house with the phone still off of the hook. After asking a neighbor if he could borrow their car to go to his wife and new baby, Mike drove to the hospital in shock.

He kept saying to himself, "God wouldn't do this to me - he wouldn't add two more, in one shot, on top of the six we already have!" In mid October of 1953, two premature baby girls were weighed in at less than four pounds apiece. Born fraternal twins, Tina and Gina Murphy had a few problems recovering in the oxygen tent, as progressive retina damage in Gina's eyes was a direct result of excessive oxygen levels. This was also blamed for a chronic respiratory problem in her one minute older sister, Tina. It would be a yearlong struggle for the two premature babies.

Mike left his wife and twins that night and stopped off at his brother's home to announce the news. His mother was staying there for the weekend, and thought he could hit two birds with one stone if he arrived before they all went to bed that night.

"Twins, you have to be joking?" Paul asked, as his brother Mike gave him a beer out of his six-pack.

"Yep," Mike responded while guzzling his beer, before seeing his mother walk into the room!

"Did I hear you right, your wife just had twins and you're here drinking with your brother?" their mother said, as she slapped Mike across the face and took his beer away.

"I'm sorry mother, I just wanted to let you know tonight," Mike said with humility.

"Congratulations, Mike, now please go to your wife," the matriarch said, as she kissed him goodbye and went back to bed."

Marion arrived home from a hospital maternity ward in a car driven by her husband. Mike borrowed his neighbor's vehicle to chauffeur home the mother of his eight children, with twins in tow. Marion carried a newborn in each hand, as the other six were giggling while surrounding her in the driveway. Although Marion felt blessed her two premature babies survived, she was overwhelmed without a clue how to juggle two newborns, a one-year-old baby, a two-year-old baby, a three-year-old toddler, a four-year-old toddler, and two school-aged children. She needed help, and it would have to come from her oldest girls.

The morning routine started each day with Colleen jumping into the twins' crib, tearing off their cloth diapers while replacing them with clean ones, and wrapping rubber pants over top of the fresh diapers. Katie would follow up by taking a bottle in each hand and feeding her little sisters at the same time. In other parts of the house, Marion was busy doing virtually the same with her one and two year olds, while simultaneously caring for the three-year-old. Breakfast commenced shortly after, with Timmy in the kitchen preparing Cornflakes for his younger siblings. On some mornings Marion substituted cold cereal with cream of wheat. A gallon of milk and cherry Kool-Aid were usually served to wash down everything. Mike avoided the breakfast scene by getting out of the house early, sometimes catching a quick bite at the office cafeteria.

Routine became Marion's friend, as it was the only safe way to maintain organization among disarray. If one cog came loose in the daily plan, anarchy took over and chaos reined. This was sometimes the case, but order needed to be restored by the time Mike came home, or his drunken rants could turn violent as a result. Marion's fear of the consequences from disorder motivated her to maintain decorum by scrubbing the house from top to bottom each day, caring for her children's needs as they emerged, having dinner prepared on time for her husband, and

putting the kids to bed early so Mike came home to a relatively peaceful setting. Although her monumental efforts usually succeeded, the days it all fell apart often became the nights of horror.

“If I have to come up there, you’ll pay a painful price,” Mike hollered at his children still stirring about in their bedrooms!

The older children found it difficult falling asleep at such an early evening hour, so they often stared out of the window, or waited for their mother to come up and read to them after serving their father dinner. Marion roamed from one bedroom to another reading the likes of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Little Women, The Bowery Boys, Heidi, The Three Musketeers and other children’s classics.

“That’s strike one,” Mike belted again as he eat dinner! “You don’t want me to have to come up there and quiet you down myself!”

Noise was not something Mike could handle while eating dinner. If he came home directly after work, the children often waited quietly until he was finished eating before they were served. Once Mike completed his meal, the table full of children often erupted into noisy chatter, while sometimes fighting for what was left in the food bowls. Mike would either retire to the living room with a newspaper, or head out to the local VFW, Men’s Club, or Pub. The kids would have to be in bed by the time he came home. However, Mike usually arrived home to a quiet household each evening, with all children in their respective bedrooms.

“Strike two,” Mike announced with chilling delivery!

Marion would run upstairs on a strike two count, fearing the consequences of her children striking out with too much noise. Once upstairs, she pleaded with the rambunctious to quiet down, often bribing them with favors. Anything was worth preventing the ire of her intoxicated husband!

Marion continued her Herculean attempts to maintain order, while mothering eight children and caring for an unpredictable husband. The days were hard, the nights filled with trepidation, the weeks unending, and the months excruciatingly long. Dupont paid monthly, with a burst of monetary infusion into the family budget at the beginning of each thirty-day cycle. Mike dolled out \$5.00 each morning for the day's allotment of food.

After her husband left for work each morning, Marion sent a runner to the corner store for daily necessities, often just enough supplies to get the family through the day. Although Mike now had a decent paying job with the Dupont Corporation, eight mouths to feed was a daunting challenge that forced him to quit college, work overtime, and bartend on the side. Marion took on part-time work during each holiday season to provide extra cash for Christmas gifts. It was a 24/7 job to maintain a household full of children running around with needs that went beyond the norm for most families. The Murphy's were no longer followers of the baby boom, but leading it by contributing more than their fair share to the largest generation in American history!

A 20th Century American Family was emerging, with Marion's walk into the second half of it picking up pace with a cadence of eight children in step, and more on the way.

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Sleep Walking

Mike traded in his Dodge sedan for a station wagon, and moved his wife into a much larger three-story home with the 'Big Eight', as the kids were so aptly named by their extended family. Sharon Hill, situated just south of Philadelphia, had new developments sprouting up in several subdivisions along the heavily traveled thoroughfare of US Route 13. A large porch surrounded their new home, with the Wilmington-Philadelphia line passing commuter trains within fifty feet of their backyard. There were three bedrooms upstairs with enough room to squeeze two adults and eight children between the interconnecting walls.

Mike and Marion took the master bedroom to sleep them and the twins, while the rest of the girls shared an adjacent room. Timmy slept in a single next to a set of bunk beds for Sean and Patrick in the remaining bedroom. An enormous kitchen kept the children from getting under Marion's feet while cooking. A large dining room provided enough space for an old rectangular table that could fit the entire family in one sitting. Mike purchased their first television and placed it in the middle of their spacious living room, with all inhabitants spending many a waking hour in front of it. That little black and white box became Marion's favorite babysitter.

The Mousketeers and other fifties favorites preoccupied the kids while Marion kept house and cooked enough food each day to feed a small army platoon. Other TV shows that captured their attention were Sally Star, Howdy Doody, Captain Kangaroo and Lassie. Marion even found time to watch her favorite, I Love Lucy, from time to time. Keeping the first six children entertained, with the godsend of all appliances, came at just the right time when Marion's hands were filled with two infants to care for at one time. The sickly twin babies were a handful, and

were making it all too clear to Marion that the Catholic Church may have to understand that artificial contraception was, in some cases, not a mortal sin!

“Father, forgive me for I have sinned.”

“The Church condemns this act as evil. One is committing mortal sin if one uses artificial contraception.”

“May I receive Communion, Father?”

“If one has committed this mortal sin, they should not participate in Communion until they receive the Sacrament of Confession.”

“May I receive absolution, Father?”

“The Church officially teaches that artificial contraception, an action that intends to make procreation unobtainable, is evil and a grave sin.”

“Ok Father, but may I receive sacramental absolution?”

“The Church charges anyone who has not yet received confession for a mortal sin, should abstain from the Eucharist.”

“All right, Father, now may I receive absolution?”

Marion's faith was as strong as ever, but she was pained by the limitations of being able to give the kind of quality attention she so desperately desired to each of her children. It became quite obvious to her that, after eight offspring, none would receive complete nurturing. Marion was acutely aware of this fact, and the price of so many children would mean they all had to share one mother, and her diluted attention.

Marion wanted to plug the leaks before more damage was done to this ship. Having another baby would put her and the rest of the family in a precarious position, and possibly sink a teetering vessel on the brink of going down at a moments notice. The Catholic Church was no

help in this regard, and only proved to make matters worse. Marion's faith, and the guidance she received from it, only complicated the puzzle that was her expanding family.

Marion was torn between Church and Family. Her loyalty to one alienated the other. Marion followed Church doctrine and became pregnant again, and this was not welcome news to the family. She was alone with this pregnancy, and the ostracizing that accompanied her term brought a legion of dark feelings, with shame, guilt and hopelessness topping the list. The more she tried to maintain order out of chaos, the more her resolve swayed. Her anguish became apparent to those close to her, as she stumbled through her days, causing the balance to tip out of control, spiraling further into an abyss of cyclical violence with her alcoholic husband.

John Murphy, born on a rainy morning, died that day. His life was not welcome in this family, so his soul decided to find another. The guilt Marion experienced prior to her ninth child's birth was now at levels high enough to sink her ship, this without bringing home another mouth to feed. Although Marion's body was strong enough to survive the problematic birth, her mind wasn't. She was inconsolable and had lost touch with her senses. A clinical nervous breakdown found Marion leaving the hospital's maternity ward not by taxicab, not sitting in the passenger side of her husband's car, but in an ambulance headed to an Institution for the tormented.

The twins were sent to their grandmother Lilly, while the local Catholic Orphanage temporarily took in the middle three. The three oldest children remained at home with a daytime nanny taking over some of Marion's responsibilities. A rotund and amiable woman of African American decent watched over Timmy, Katie and Colleen while their father worked. Mike came home each evening to care for his oldest children, taking them to visit their mother several nights a week. Demands by Katie and Colleen had them frequently visiting their siblings at the orphanage, where Patrick and Sean were housed in a large ward with other boys, and Christine in an adjacent building for girls.

"Daddy, are we going to the orphanage tonight?" Colleen asked.

"Yes, then we can stop by to visit your mother on the way home," Mike responded.

"I miss mommy," Katie said. "She's been gone so long."

"How long has mommy been gone?" Colleen asked her father.

"Just a couple of months, but we expect her home soon," Mike said while hugging his two oldest girls.

"Will all of the babies be coming home?" Timmy asked.

"Not right away, but as soon as mommy is up to it, we'll all be together again."

There was plenty of room for the twins in their grandmother's home home. Lilly had experience caring for these two, and the twins were quite familiar with their grandmother.

"Marion, your children need you," Lilly said, with the twins at their mother's hospital bedside.

"Yes, they do," said Marion in a semi-catatonic state.

"You need to get well and come home to them."

"Yes, I do."

“Oh Marion, please snap out of it,” Lilly said while getting in bed with her daughter and pleading with her!”

“Yes, I will.”

Lilly was having little effect on her normally stoic daughter. The little girl that fought her mother tooth and nail on the smallest of issues was now before her, providing no argument. The scene felt faintly familiar to Lilly, with distant memory of being in Marion's shoes so many years ago when her dying sister broke the spell of her own nervous breakdown. “What was it that my sister said to snap me out of it?” Lilly thought. “Something about our mother's death,” Lilly remembered.

“Don't abandon your children like your father abandoned you,” Lilly blurted out!

“No, I shouldn't abandon my children,” Marion responded without much expression.

“Your father hurt you and that isn't something your children should go through!”

“My father hurt me and that is not something my children should go through,” Marion replied with a little less apathy.

“That's it Marion, you don't want to be like your father. Now snap out of it and come home to your children, and be the wonderful mother your kids have come to know and depend on!”

“I need to snap out of it and come home to my children, because they need me,” Marion said with growing urgency!”

“Yes Marion, that's right – now snap out of it and go home to your children,” Lilly continued the vigorous barrage!”

“That's it,” Marion cried! “I need to get home to my children!”

“That’s the fighting spirit, Marion,” Lilly shouted as she helped her daughter out of bed and walked her around the room while trying to work out the atrophy that set in after three months of little movement.

“I need to get out of here and go home to my children,” Marion broadcasted to the nearby nurses and doctors, who looked on with amazement and delight at their patient’s lucidity!

Mother and Daughter walked into the Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania home with twins in hand, relieving the surprised nanny of her duties. Timmy, now nine years old, ran to his mother’s side while the oldest girls screeched in joy. Although three months late, the joyous homecoming reunited the family with one last task at hand. Once Mike arrived home from work, they piled into the station wagon and drove to the orphanage, retrieving the middle three to make the family whole again!

The Big Eight were reunited once more, with renewed hope. The loss of the ninth child was not a topic for discussion, as the painful experience was permanently buried along with baby John, in a small grave just outside of town. The Murphy’s moved on as a family, stronger and closer as a result of their shared tragedy.

It was a quiet and productive time for the Murphy's as they moved forward with a new sense of purpose. An inseparable bond formed between brothers and sisters. A connection that was a direct result of the trauma experienced when the eight thought they might be permanently separated. They learned not to take each other for granted, and the sibling rivalry, once growing among the factions, now transformed into nurture and support.

Marion took advantage of the situation by building unity from top to bottom. The siblings now had each other's back, feeling stronger for what they had just come through. This cohesion would bind their links together for their entire lives, connecting them in so many ways. The Murphy's were fashioning their own nexus, creating an unspoken and sacred covenant between the individual and the whole. This family shared a connection few others had the capacity for. But unfortunately, other counteracting forces were also at hand.

"Why won't your health insurance cover my hospital stay?"

"It covers maternity, but not the mental health portion," Mike responded to his wife while canvassing all of the medical bills before him.

"I can't ask my mother to help us with all of these debts, Marion said."

"Why not, she's come through in the pinch before?"

"She took care of the twins and paid for other expenses while I was gone."

"We've got four kids in parochial school, with more to follow every year," Mike announced while scratching his head and tallying expenses.

"I can try my sister?"

"Who, Martha?"

"Yeah, she's been saving a long time and might be able to help out this time."

Marion's sister, Martha, had been saving for many years. A fur coat was at the top of her wish list. It was a dream of hers that was made a reality through many years of doing without. She had recently married a wonderful man who sired their first child soon after. Money was also tight in that new family, so Marion was forced to go back to the well.

"Hi Mom, it's Marion."

"Hi, how are you feeling today?"

"Much better. I get stronger everyday," Marion replied with sincerity. "The anti-depressants help, and the kids keep me focused on what's important."

"Children are a blessing that give women purpose."

"Yes they do, mom."

"Are you still coming up for Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah, but we need to pay these outstanding hospital bills first."

"Oh honey, I don't have that kind of money!"

"I know. We'll make it through somehow."

"I'll help out as much as I can."

"Thank you, Mom."

Marion learned early how to 'borrow from Peter to pay Paul', and was becoming quite adept at it with each new addition to the family. Peter, in this circumstance, was her mother and continued to be throughout most of her life; a bountiful source Marion didn't hesitate to tap.

Although down time was at a premium in this family, Mike and Marion tried to take the entire clan out once a month to an amusement park via ferry over the Delaware river in New Jersey, day trips to the Jersey shore, a night out to the Chester Pike drive-in movie theatre, and other such venues of family fun.

“I want you all in PJ's by 7:00pm,” Marion ordered her children!

“Is daddy coming home early tonight?” Patrick asked his mother.

“Yes, but after you're in your PJ's, I want everyone back down here,” Marion said with a smile that caught the older kids' attention.

“I bet I know what's going on,” Katie announced smugly.

“Oh yeah, what's that?” Colleen asked as they all raced up to their respective bedrooms, and into their nightly garb.

“Mom's going to read to all of us in the living room,” Katie stated with confidence.

“I don't think so,” Timmy proclaimed from across the hall.

“Oh yeah, Mr. smarty pants, than what do you think we'll be doing?” Katie asked while sticking her tongue out.

“Mom never waits for Dad to read to us in the living room,” Timmy responded while trailing his younger brothers into the bedroom.

“Than what do you think Mom and Dad have planned for us?” Colleen asked while standing by her sister's side with arms crossed.

“Drive-in Movie,” Timmy replied, while his younger brothers crawled between his legs and raced down the hall, slipping and sliding on the hardwood floors.

Mike piled everyone into the station wagon, seat backs down with blankets and pillows lined evenly next to each other. A basket full of cherry cool-aid, popcorn and sandwiches followed Marion into the front seat. It was dusk, nearly 9:00pm in the summer of 1956, with Jimmy Stewart and Doris Day staring in, 'The Man Who Knew Too Much'.

"Mommy, what's this movie about?" inquired five-year old Sean.

"It's about a mother and father on holiday with a little son like you, dear."

"What happens to the little boy?" Sean asked with his usual curiosity.

"He gets separated from his parents, but is never forgotten by them," Marion replied, while capturing the analogy between movie and recent real life circumstances.

"Oh, like you and Daddy never forgot about me in the orphanage," the ultra sensitive boy, with a heart of gold, said.

"Yes, honey. I never forgot about any of you. You were always in my heart and always will be, no matter what happens, Marion said as she poured cool-aid and passed out sandwiches.

"So mommy, will we always be together?" Sean continued his inquiry while Patrick kicked him, telling him to quiet down and watch the movie.

"Our strength is our togetherness, but whatever will be will be," Marion started to sing.

"The future's not ours to see."

And so sang Marion, along with Doris Day on the outdoor screen, while the back half of the station wagon joined in on chorus:

"When I was just a little girl,
I asked my mother, what will I be?
Will I be pretty?
Will I be rich?
Here's what she said to me:

Que Sera Sera,
whatever will be, will be.
The future's not ours to see.
Que Sera Sera,
what will be, will be.
When I grew up and fell in love,
I asked my sweetheart, what lies ahead?
Will we have rainbows day after day?
Here's what my sweetheart said:
Que sera, sera,
whatever will be, will be
the future's not ours to see.
que sera, sera,
what will be, will be
Now I have children of my own
they ask their mother what will I be?
Will I be handsome?
Will I be rich?
I tell them tenderly
Que sera, sera,
whatever will be, will be;
the future's not ours to see.
que sera, sera,
what will be, will be.”