

*A Biography*

# JANET LEIGH

Michelangelo Capua

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Janet Leigh

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# Janet Leigh

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MICHELANGELO CAPUA




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To Walter Federico Salazar

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## *Preface*

A few years ago on a cross-country train ride in Italy, I watched a film titled *Holiday Affair* on DVD starring Robert Mitchum. Suddenly I found myself hypnotized by the breathtaking presence of Mitchum's female co-star — a stunning blond with delicately modeled features, whom I recognized shortly after as Janet Leigh.

I knew very little about this actress, except that she had been married to Tony Curtis and her daughter was Jamie Lee Curtis, and she had starred in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and in Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*.

I quickly researched her life and career and found out she had written her own autobiography in 1985. Yet, in contrast to her ex-husband, no other book had been published on this underrated star whose talent and exquisite beauty graced more than 50 films over a period of 50 years.

Soon I realized what a beautiful, compassionate and gracious woman Jeanette Helen Morrison (Janet Leigh's real name) was, and what an amazing and fulfilling life she had.

She earned a Golden Globe and an Academy Award nomination, appeared on many TV shows, published four books, volunteered for numerous charitable organizations, was an active political campaigner for the Democratic Party and raised two beautiful daughters.

It all began as a true Cinderella story when she was discovered by MGM silver screen diva Norman Shearer. Janet was first cast in roles that enhanced her qualities as a fresh-faced ingénue. Later she starred in four movies that became instant classics: *Touch of Evil*, *Psycho*, *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Bye Bye Birdie*.

Her marriage to dreamboat Tony Curtis was celebrated as a Hollywood fairy tale. "Remarkable" was the word that fellow actress and Leigh's good friend, Debbie Reynolds, used to describe that magical yet turbulent union.



Sometimes two people really clicked. Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh met one day.... Janet was something to behold; beautiful as well as talented. Not jealous, not vindictive, not a bitch, not boring; she's a guileless, dear, terrific lady. Tony was a big, macho, Rambo-type guy; stunning, with gorgeous blue eyes and an ego on steroids. But he took one look at her and it was like the Fourth of July tripled.

Janet had the world trying to get her, but Tony wanted her and she didn't have a prayer. It was physical; it was sexual. It was like dynamite. He got her and married her.

Janet Leigh was unbelievably loved by almost everyone, especially in the entertainment business. As a crewmember said once to her daughter Jamie Lee, Janet was the only person he ever worked with for which no one had said anything unpleasant about her character. She was always smiling and ready to help someone in difficulties.

Janet always downplayed her achievements, yet she felt a great responsibility toward her fans, whom she tried to make happy by being approachable and available all the time. She once said:

We hold people's dreams in our hands. We should keep the old image of Hollywood alive. Every time I go to a black tie function I always wear something spectacular. People come to me and say, "You look just like a movie star." And I say, "Well, isn't that what we're supposed to be?"

Sadly, she was not given enough chances during her career to demonstrate her incredible talent, probably because she did not receive the critical acclaim she deserved. Yet she was always genuinely grateful for her amazing life. The invaluable and often concealed humanitarian aid to the underprivileged she gave throughout the years brought her the most satisfaction.

In Hollywood, the land of dreams, Janet Leigh managed to stay real. "Jeanette Helen Morrison is who I am. That's the reality," she liked to repeat.

Janet Leigh is who I am working, and that's my profession. I think that possibly trouble happens with some of our stars who do claw their way up; once they get there, it's almost as if they feel that the profession becomes the reality of their life, and to me it didn't — for me, the reality was my life. Does that make any sense?

I have benefited from the help of many individuals and institutions, and from the assistance and support of friends, without whom the completion of this project would have been impossible. I would like to thank Yaakov Perry; Beatrice Nadalutti; the helpful staff of the British Film Institute in London; the staff of Bobst Library, New York University; the staff of New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center; Museum of Television and Radio, New York; the staff of the British Library's Humanity Reading Room,

St. Pancras, London; Trish Richards, special collections assistant, University of the Pacific Library, Stockton, California; and Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Material Store, New York.

Finally I offer my immense gratitude to my editor and dear friend, Stuart Williams.

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# 1

## *Jeanette Helen Morrison*

She's beautiful, but the chances of anything coming of all this are so terribly slight.—Norma Shearer

At the beginning of the twentieth century, hardworking couple John B. and Kate Reeb Morrison settled with their four sons in Hornitos, California. Life was very hard for the Morrisons, who struggled to make a decent living to feed their big family.

By the time their youngest child, Frederick Robert, was seven, Kate had developed an incurable cataract and soon became blind. The family moved a few miles southwest to the little town of Merced where work opportunities seemed more favorable. John found employment at a railway company, and the four boys did odd jobs to help their parents pay the bills.

After his older brothers married and moved away from home, young Fred opted to stay in Merced where he met Helen Lita Westergaard, a pretty, spirited daughter of Danish immigrants. The young couple quickly tied the knot after a few months of dating. For William and Lita Coffee Westergaard, their daughter Helen's marriage to Fred was most likely a welcomed one. Helen was, in fact, the second of six children William supported with his modest salary as a ditch digger.

Helen discovered she was pregnant a few weeks after their wedding. On July 6, 1927, she gave birth to a healthy, beautiful girl. Writing as Mrs. Fred Morrison, Helen described the circumstances connected to the happy event twenty-two years later in an article for *Photoplay*:

Fred and I ... were awaiting our long-overdue first baby and we still didn't have a name for her. *Her*. That was the way I always spoke of the baby from the very first day I knew she was coming. My handsome young husband and I had been married a little over a year and he indulged me in everything. Fred got as close to an argument then as he ever does.

“Look Helen,” he said, “We ought to consider a few boys’ names, anyhow.”

“I just can’t,” I answered, stubbornly. “She’s simply got to be a girl with your nose and my eyes.”

“Okay, hon,” Fred said. “She’s a girl!”

Two days later, she actually was, and she did have my eyes and Fred’s nose and wavy hair. The next thing I noticed after taking all that in was the doctor asking me her name. “Jeanette,” I said, for no reason at all....<sup>1</sup>

From the start, Jeanette was a good baby. At the end of 1929 the Great Depression took hold of the American economy, and Fred Morrison, like millions of Americans, struggled to find a permanent job. In spite of her family’s destitution, those were happy times for little Jeanette, who grew in a caring and loving environment.

After being employed in various local factories, Fred Morrison moved his family to Stockton — “a hot cattle town,” as Helen used to call it — sixty miles away from Merced. Hired by Grover Grider, Fred worked for some time as an electrical store salesman at ten dollars a week salary. On such a modest income the family was barely able to survive, let alone be able to afford its own house. Jeanette’s parents tried to save money for her future college education — a dream they both had, but could never fulfill. Since her birth, Jeanette became the center of their world. Fred and Helen were very protective of their only child, spoiling her as much as they could afford. Still, the Morrisons were often able to scrape some money together to at least make their Jeanette happy. One Christmas Jeanette wished for a pair of key roller-skates, and, true to form, they did not hesitate to make some sacrifices to get them for her.

Jeanette’s first childhood memories were from around age four and connected to her excitement of visiting her Westergaard grandparents’ house for Christmas. It was there where she could finally play with her favorite cousin, on whom she had her first crush. She remembered the thrill the whole family felt on that same festive occasion when her mother and five uncles and aunts presented her grandparents with a washing machine that they had all chipped in to buy.

Jeanette was also very close to the Morrisons’ grandparents and would spend several weeks there during the summers. Despite belonging to an extended family with many cousins, Jeanette missed the presence of a sibling, someone to spend time with at home while her parents were still at work. She began to get lost in a world of her own, avidly reading books, listening to the radio or watching movies. Cinema was a perfect, inexpensive babysitter, especially on the weekend when she could watch a double-bill with one ticket. With little Jeanette “parked” in a safe, fun place, Fred and Helen had the

opportunity to have a little time for themselves. Once the show was over she would run home and meticulously tell all about what she had watched. Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, and Judy Garland were her favorite stars.

“I just loved the movies,” Janet revealed years later. “I lived for the movies: I travelled all over the world, I wore beautiful gowns. It was the dream world of everyone’s life ... there was no other form of visual entertainment. Yet I never thought that I’d be in it.”<sup>2</sup>

Jeanette attended Weber Grammar School, where she was a precocious student, excelling in math under Fred’s tutelage.

“She was really an eager beaver,” explained Helen. “I don’t know just when she first learned to swim or dance or any of that. It seems to me she always knew. As a matter of fact, she loved everything except housework, though she’d do it. And cooking she never did have much chance to learn about ... both her father and I worked, so we arranged for her to go to a boarding house for a hot meal at lunch time.”<sup>3</sup>

As she grew older, her parents were very proud of her beauty and of her good character. However, this did not stop them from being very protective — especially Helen, who was obsessed with the idea that Jeanette might fall ill. The anxious mother was always trying to get her daughter into coats, boots and hats, and Jeanette was always resisting. After washing her hair, Helen would insist Jeanette wear two hats, fearing she would catch a cold.

When she was around nine, Jeanette was invited to a birthday party. Helen, as usual, before picking out her daughter’s clothes, washed her hair and made her wear a little cap to pull down over her head, and topping this with a wide-brimmed hat. This was a frustrating imposition which embarrassed Jeanette in front of the other kids. Later on, when her daughter became a movie star and would be all done up, ready to go to a party, Fred would joke with his daughter: “Be sure and wear your two hats.”

When Jeanette was ready to graduate from grammar school, Helen wanted to get her a very special graduation dress but could only afford \$7.95 on her meager budget. The two walked all over Stockton trying to find a pretty outfit at that price. They kept seeing beautiful dresses all over town,



Janet Leigh at age 6 (1933).

but at more expensive prices. While Helen was trying to figure out how she could possibly afford a more expensive one, Janet balked, saying that if they could not find a dress at \$7.95 she would not graduate. They finally found a lovely dress, and she proudly attended her graduation ceremony.

Fred and Helen considered her daughter very talented because she was good at singing, having a pleasant voice. They saw her as a sort of child prodigy. Helen, in fact, later claimed that Jeanette always wanted to be a singer. "She came by that ambition naturally," said Helen. "Fred sang in the Presbyterian Church choir, where Janet went to Sunday school. We really did have a hard time making ends meet, but since Janet had such a clear, sweet voice, we did manage voice and piano lessons for her."<sup>4</sup>

Fred's boss, Grover Grider, was a drum major in the Stockton marching band. Grider offered ten-year-old Jeanette a place in the band along with his younger son, as a miniature drum girl and boy in an upcoming march. After a short period of training, Jeanette quickly learned her routines and made her first public appearance in a local parade. The band was so impressed with her skills that they wanted to reward her with a gift. Jeanette asked for a raincoat, which she received together with a hat and an umbrella.

As her daughter was growing older, Helen began to live the life she never had for herself, such as completing her education and developing a talent. Eventually, Jeanette felt the onerous responsibility for living a life of "two people."

At age twelve Jeanette entered Stockton High School, where she was accepted in one of the school musical groups and also participated in the Young People's Christian Endeavor at the local Presbyterian Church. During that time she met Richard "Dick" Doane, a very handsome boy whose family had recently moved to Stockton. They first met in church, and later they discovered they were to be classmates in the eighth grade. They platonically dated for over a year. Later, when the Second World War started, Dick was one of the first boys from Stockton to enlist. To Janet this gesture was very romantic, even though she was devastated at the idea of losing him. She wrote him long letters while he was in camp. When he left, Helen, as she later admitted, drew a sigh of relief, afraid Jeanette would have otherwise married him.

When Grandpa Morrison was hospitalized with terminal cancer, Fred, Helen and Jeanette packed up and moved back to Merced and into the Morrisons' house. That Christmas season also brought the tragedy of Pearl Harbor.

For the first time Janet worked at the local dime store during the holidays, but by the time summer vacation came, Stockton's College of the Pacific was

packed with young boys in uniform. So Jeanette took a new job in another local shop. While Helen and Fred, who had found a job in a nearby market, were grateful for the extra income her daughter was bringing home, they were not too happy about her contact with so many men. The store was, in fact, a haberdashery, and Jeanette worked in the military department where the cadets were always swarming. Some of them would ask her out, but Helen did not allow her to date men much older than her fifteen-year-old daughter. Regardless, Helen's fears were realized when, only few months later, Jeanette met a nineteen-year-old student, John Kenneth "Kenny" Carlyle. Kenny was a handsome young man who gave her great comfort when her grandfather died. Eventually they fell deeply and madly in love. However, when Fred decided that it was time to go back to Stockton where better job opportunities were available, Janet was devastated by the idea of losing her friends and leaving Kenny.

At the beginning, the Morrisons stayed in a cheap motel in Stockton. Jeanette was very depressed, and when she received an invitation by letter to spend two weeks with a girlfriend in Merced, Helen and Fred gave her permission to go. In Merced her friends came up with the idea that, in order to make her stay permanently in Merced, she should marry Kenny. With the Carlyles' blessings, Jeanette and Kenny drove to Reno, where she had to lie about her age in order to be legally married. When they returned to Merced they found Fred and Helen at the Carlyles' waiting for her. Silently they took her by the arm, put her in the car and drove her away from Kenny, who was stunned and unable to react. Four months later the whole "mistake" was annulled. Despite several attempts on his part, Jeanette never saw her Kenny again. The news of her short marriage and its annulment was kept hush-hush to prevent any scandal in their small town. Dick Doane was a very supportive friend during that dark moment in her life, even though he never knew the real reason for Jeanette's depression. Slowly, when school started back and all her regular activities resumed, Jeanette was able to return to her normal life. Yet for years to come she would live in fear that her secret would come back to haunt her.

Being extremely smart and a hard-working student, Jeanette graduated from high school in three and a half years. In September 1943, at only sixteen years old, she enrolled at the College of the Pacific in Stockton to study music and psychology. Her parents' dream had come true. The education denied them because of their young marriage was now possible for their beloved daughter. During her free time Jeanette would work at the college information desk or would rehearse with the a capella choir she joined.

During the summer semester of 1944 Jeanette, now living at the Alpha



Theta Tau sorority house, met Stanley Reames. Stan was a good-looking, tall, young Navy man, studying radiology under the V-12 program for training reserve officers at the nearby Officers Training School. He was also forming an orchestra for the student body at the College of the Pacific and needed a vocalist. When he heard that Jeanette was a singer, he asked to meet her for an audition. Stan listened, looked her over carefully and decided right then that the beautiful blond creature with those big brown eyes and a pleasant voice was going to be his singer. But after they started dating, he changed his mind. "Not my girl," he said. "Too public!"<sup>5</sup>

Dating Stan, who was sort of glamorous at school because of his band's popularity, was wonderful for Jeanette. It was on the porch of the sorority house where he first kissed her, and on the same porch where they secretly became engaged. From the very beginning, Fred and Helen approved of their daughter's relationship with Stan. When the time came for the young couple to announce their engagement, Jeanette's parents did not object to the decision.

Jeanette and Stan were married on October 5, 1945, in the Morris Chapel at the College of the Pacific. The bride wore a lovely white long dress with a finger-tip veil. Her best friend, Maggie Shepherd, was her bridesmaid. Helen wept from the moment Fred walked her daughter up the aisle right down to the last peal of the organ. After an intimate reception at the sorority house, the newlyweds drove down the coast toward Los Angeles for a ten-day honeymoon. When they returned to Stockton, Mrs. Stanley Reames learned of her parents' plan to move out of Stockton. Fred had taken an offer to be assistant desk clerk at the Sugar Bowl Sky Lodge in Soda Springs, California, where Helen later worked as a waitress in the dining room. They had never seen snow, so the offer seemed an exciting, congenial, and well paid proposition, which could have provided them with a pleasant place to live and new people to be around.

Fred and Helen promised Jeanette and Stan a trip to Sugar Bowl later that year as a Christmas present. By the time the holiday approached, Jeanette surely needed a vacation. In order to keep up with their expenses, the Reameses had taken in two uniformed college boys as boarders. Jeanette took care of the house, cleaning, washing and cooking, while at the same time trying to keep up with her studies. When Christmas finally came, the couple joined Fred and Helen at Sugar Bowl. They had a wonderful, unforgettable week playing out in the snow all day and enjoying a healthy lifestyle in the mountains. One day, wearing an old flying jacket over a little ski suit, her hair blowing in the wind, Janet stood laughing at the club photographer, who took a shot of her. He planned to print it in the lodge album they had for guests. Jeanette couldn't know at the time how that photograph would soon change her life forever.

The following year the Reameses planned to move to Los Angeles where Stan hoped to become part of a famous band. Jeanette was against the idea, having only one year left to earn her degree. It was not an easy decision to make and caused a lot of anguish between husband and wife. While she wanted to complete her education and look for a stable job, Stan, who did not enjoy his studies, felt he was ready to pursue his dreams in the music industry, and Los Angeles was the place to be. During spring break of 1947, before agreeing to sell their car and move out of Stockton, Jeanette and Stan once again visited Helen and Fred at the Sugar Bowl Ski Lodge. This time it was not as fun as the previous holiday. Jeanette was concerned about her husband's choice, which seemed very unrealistic and quite frightening — especially moneywise. Moreover, the idea of giving up college after all the sacrifices her family had made for her did not feel right. She expected advice from her parents, which did not come. They were disappointed in her leaving college, yet they also thought that her place was to be with her husband.

During Jeanette and Stan's stay, Fred mentioned to Jeanette that actress Norma Shearer and her husband Marty Arrougé had been guests at the lodge for several weeks. Jeanette was excited at the idea her parents had met one of her favorite movie stars. She was also surprised to learn that the actress had noticed her in a photograph. From this point there are several versions of the story that led to Jeanette's ticket to Hollywood. Her own, reported in her autobiography, has it that Shearer and Arrougé noticed the photograph on Fred's desk and liked it so much that they took it home with them. Her version claimed that later they asked for additional snapshots, which Fred sent, taken during Jeanette's second holiday at the lodge.

A second version, reported by Helen in the article she wrote for *Photoplay*, has Shearer and her husband "looking through the album and [seeing] the picture of Janet. Miss Shearer asked who she was and when I said my daughter, she asked if she could borrow the picture for a few days. She said she wanted to take the photograph to Hollywood and show it to M.G.M., but she cautioned us not to mention it to Janet. 'She's beautiful,' Miss Shearer said, 'but the chances of anything coming of all this are so terribly slight.'"<sup>6</sup>

A third version, similar to the latter and reported by a Shearer's biographer, has Shearer ordering an enlargement of the picture after noticing Jeanette's striking beauty in the hotel's souvenir album. Regardless of how it happened, it took almost six months before something incredible — what all the magazines would later call a "Cinderella story" — shook Jeanette's life. In the meantime, the Reameses moved, as planned, to Los Angeles. They rented a seven-dollar-a-week room in the crummy Harvey Hotel on Santa Monica Boulevard. While Stan was auditioning all over the city for a band to work

with, Jeanette stayed in their squalid room most of the time, keeping house and trying to make it more livable. It was a grim period — Stan could not find a job, as the era of big bands was coming to an end — and the couple was often broke.

Unexpectedly, a letter forwarded from Stockton, addressed to Miss Jeanette Morrison, was delivered to the Harvey Hotel. It was a request from MCA, one of the most prominent talent agencies, to call them up as soon as possible to make an appointment for a possible representation. At first Jeanette thought it was a joke or a mistake. But after she nervously phoned the MCA Beverly Hills office of Levis Green, who had signed the letter, and made an appointment the following day, she realized that nobody had made an error.

She was equally stunned afterwards when she learned of the events leading to Green's letter. It was at a dinner at Romanoff's with agent Charles Feldman and MGM executives Eddie Mannix and Benny Thau that Norma Shearer had shown one of the photographs Fred had sent her. Shearer had waited until the gentlemen had finished their dessert and were enjoying their cigars. Then, much in the manner of a proud lady displaying her prized jewels, she produced the photograph. The men were not particularly impressed; however, to not displease the star, they passed on the picture to Lew Wasserman, head of MCA. Wasserman subsequently, along with a stack of other photos of potential new faces, passed it on to Green, head of the new talent department, who looked at Jeanette's beautiful, fresh young face and agreed with Shearer's hunch that it was worth a follow-up.

With the help of some members in Stan's band, Jeanette chose the dress and make-up to wear to the meeting. She only had 30 cents in her pocket and spent it on a little flower to place in her hair. The following morning when she walked into Green's office, the executive took a quick look at her and told her he wanted her to look like she appeared in the photograph he had of her — with no make-up and with her hair down. He also promised to take her the next day to the talent department of MGM. Jeanette left MCA's offices and ran home, nearly in tears. She took a ten-dollar bill her parents had sent her for her birthday and bought a simple pink dress for her second meeting with Green. Green was happy to drive her in his big car to the office of Lucille Ryman, head of the talent department at MGM. Jeanette was gently questioned about her personal and professional background. At the end of the interview she was told by Ryman that MGM had offered her a seven-year exclusive standard contract at \$50 per week, with the option to revise it periodically. Jeanette was ecstatic, as she was ushered to the office of the drama coach Lillian Burns, who immediately gave her a scene to work on from Mervyn LeRoy's *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* in which a wife says goodbye to her husband, leaving for a dangerous mission.

The next day Jeanette nervously entered Burns' office, and the drama coach noticed immediately how tense she was in reading the assigned part. Without commenting on her acting, Burns explained that the studio wanted to bring her along very slowly and dismissed her after telling her to wait for a call. Jeanette was devastated, as she thought she had made a terrible impression on Burns and would never be called again. Nonetheless, the following Monday she was asked to return to MGM. Upon her arrival Burns asked Jeanette to wait in one of her offices. An executive producer, who had a fixation with singing actresses, had insisted that Beverly Tyler read for the part. Tyler, a young actress who had just made her first film, *The Green Years* (1946), was very determined to get the part of Lissy Anne McBean for the upcoming film *The Romance of Rosy Ridge*, opposite Van Johnson, MGM's most popular leading man.

While Jeanette was waiting in one room, Tyler, who was in costume for the picture, read for the part after being introduced by Burns to the film director and the producer. As soon as she was finished, Burns went into the other room to Jeanette and brought her a copy of that same scene, spending half an hour explaining the script and the part. She asked Jeanette if she could come back the following day to read the lines, specifying that it was not necessary for her to memorize them. Burns saw instantly that Jeanette would be perfect for that role. Jeanette came back and read the scene for Burns, who immediately called Jack Cummings, the producer, who brought along the director, Roy Rowland. They all sat in Burns' office, and suddenly, after Jeanette had read the scene once again in front of the two men, Cummings' eyes popped open. He immediately took Jeanette to wardrobe and outfitted her, then shot some silent color tests. The following day Jeanette received a phone call from Harry Friedman, who was her assigned agent at MCA. He instructed her to be ready to go to MGM's stage 10 to make a screen test with Selena Royle, who played the mother in the film. It was quite a difficult scene, in which Janet had to make a quick transition from laughing happily to tears. Royle had previously done the same test with Beverly Tyler, still considered first choice by the film's executive producer. Ten days later both tests were shown to Louis B. Mayer in the presence of Burns, Cummings and Rowland. After the lights were turned on in the screening room the president of MGM said only one line: "Give it to the new girl!" He did not know Jeanette's name or who she was, but his decision was final and indisputable. Janet remembered how she learned about the news

I had a lesson with Miss Burns, and I was waiting in the little anteroom — her office was in the back — and I was early. I was always early. It was just fun to sit there and watch people come in and out. And I had to go to the ladies room, so

I went, and I'm washing my hands and I hear somebody pounding on the door. It's Harry Friedman, my agent. He said, "Jeanette, are you in here? Jeanette? Jeanette?" I said, "Harry, what are you doing? I'm in the ladies room." He burst in the door, got my hand, ran back to Lillian's office, and the door's open and Lillian's there, and Jack Cummings is there and Ray Rowland is there and Harry dragged me into the room and sits me down, and says, "You've got the picture!" ... I started to cry. I've goose bumps right now. I'll never forget it as long as I live.... The first thing they did was to bring me to wardrobe. And after I got back from wardrobe I went to Miss Burns' office and I called my husband, Stan, at my aunt's house, and then I called Mom and Dad. That's when Stan and I lived in the back of their garage. It was their laundry room, but was big enough so that we could get a bed in there.... I just said, "I'm going to be in a movie."<sup>7</sup>

"It was her smile that did it," Roy Rowland remarked afterwards.<sup>8</sup>

Without delay Jeanette completed the fittings of all her costumes. She was, in fact, told to be ready within two weeks to go on location at a Santa Cruz mountain site for a three-month shoot. She suddenly became visibly nervous and began to cry, thinking she could not afford the transportation

and living expenses on location. She was completely naïve and did not know anything about the film industry.

"Thank you," she said to the MGM executives when they explained to her that all the expenses were going to be paid by the production, "but it would be months before I could repay you and I can't be under that sort of obligation." They finally got it across to her that the studio always paid such costs.<sup>9</sup>

Years later Jeanette learned that Mr. Mayer found Beverly Tyler "too sophisticated for the rustic girl. Roy loved [my] test but told Van he was taking a gamble because of my



An early publicity shot.

inexperience, I was not told until years later that a trained actress was waiting back at the studio in case I faltered.”<sup>10</sup>

The entire thing seemed like a dream to Jeanette, who just a couple of months earlier was standing in line to see Van Johnson’s latest film. Now he was her leading man. On their first meeting, Jeanette had butterflies in her stomach and stayed silent while standing in front of Johnson. Her movie idol quickly congratulated her for a wonderful screen test.

She received the same reaction a couple of days later when she met Mr. Mayer in his office. The president of MGM gracefully welcomed her to the big MGM family, wishing her a great and long-lasting career. Jeanette, who felt very intimidated by her new mega-boss, politely thanked him but was unable to pronounce any other word.

When Norma Shearer was told of Jeanette’s casting as the female romantic lead in *The Romance of Rosy Ridge*, she promptly went to the studio to personally congratulate her. It was the first time the star and her “discovery” had met. Shearer kindly agreed to pose for some publicity stills with Van Johnson and Jeanette, who waved the famous photograph Shearer had shown to the MGM executives in her hand. When the photo session was over, Jeanette was told that her name had to be changed. First, the studio suggested that Reames could be easily mispronounced by fans, so they opted to keep the Morrison. But Van Johnson came up with a better name. He shortened Jeanette to Janet, and since *The Romance of Rosy Ridge* was set during the Civil War, he thought of General Lee, but spelled it Leigh. At first Jeanette was baffled by sharing her new last name with Vivien Leigh, who was an established star, but Johnson convinced her that he had no problem sharing his own first name with actor Van Heflin. How could she ever disagree with her favorite film star and idol of millions of fans? That day Jeanette Helen Morrison Reames walked out of the MGM studios with a new name: Janet Leigh. A few days later, on August 22, 1946, the *New York Times* published a short article entirely dedicated to Hollywood’s new leading actress, titled “Girl’s First Screen Role Is Opposite Van Johnson.”

HOLLYWOOD. Calif., Aug 21—Janet Leigh, 19-year-old newcomer to the screen, was named today by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for the leading feminine role opposite Van Johnson in “The Romance of Rosy Ridge.” Miss Leigh, who has no theatrical experience at all, according to the studio, was discovered by Norma Shearer in Stockton, Calif., and was brought to the studio on Miss Shearer’s advice.

The Metro publicity department regards Miss Leigh as the first legitimate example of a Hollywood Cinderella fable to appear in many years, since her first assignment is a leading role in a major picture and much fanfare will accompany her screen debut. She will play an Ozark mountain girl in “Rosy Ridge,” which





With Van Johnson in Roy Rowland's *The Romance of Rosy Ridge* (1947).

has been adapted from a MacKinlay Kantor short story of the post-Civil War period.<sup>11</sup>

At the end of August, at nineteen years old and without any acting experience, Janet Leigh was ready to leave for Santa Cruz, California, to film *The Romance of Rosy Ridge*, playing opposite Van Johnson, the highest paid actor in Hollywood. Before saying good-bye, Stan promised to visit her soon. A car picked her up and took her to the station where the MGM crew boarded a train. She traveled overnight in the company of Ruth Rowland, the director's wife. In Santa Cruz the cast and part of the crew was lodged in a nice hotel overlooking a pier and an amusement park.

Janet soon became a favorite with the production crew. "Everyone was so kind on the set," she said in one of her first interviews. "Mr. Johnson gave me heaps of acting tips."<sup>12</sup> She added:

I could not have gotten through without the support of Van and the crew. I was on my own a few months now without the grooming I always thought I needed. I washed out my clothes every day because I didn't know the wardrobe mistress did that. I stayed by my trailer and knitted furiously between takes to prevent myself from fretting. I remember Thomas Michell [who played the role of her

father] kept telling me to tone down and even said, "Stop acting because the camera will not be on you in this scene."<sup>13</sup>

Despite her naïveté, Janet was never scared or nervous. "It was such a fairy story," she said, "it was almost unreal. I didn't know that they had scheduled some of the harder scenes, so that if I hadn't cut it they would have replaced me just like that. But I didn't know that. I didn't know the workings of anything."<sup>14</sup>

Van Johnson later commented, "I've acted with a lot of girls but I've never known a newcomer to do as well as Janet Leigh."<sup>15</sup> Janet confessed that she learned from him

how to handle herself on a set. Once during a scene she accidentally blocked him from the camera's view. When the take was over, Janet panicked, knowing that she had made a terrible mistake. "Honey, don't worry about that," Johnson calmly told her. "The camera will find me. If not, we'll do it again."<sup>16</sup>

The atmosphere on and off the set was extremely relaxed. Often various members of the crew cooked for the group in Johnson's hotel suite, since he could not go to a restaurant without running into hordes of fans. "We were a unified, happy family, working toward our mutual goal," Janet recalled. Johnson became her favorite leading man. He eventually made three films with her. Every day at dawn, studio limousines transported the cast from their hotel to the set, which was based on a farm where they all worked. Janet pitched hay, hauled water, gathered the wheat and learned the art of milking a cow. Her hands and nails broke soon enough to give her the authentic look of a farm girl, yet she never complained. Often fans were lined around the fence of the farm to catch a glimpse of the shoot, hoping to get Van Johnson's autograph.



With second husband Stanley Reames at an MGM film premiere (1947) (Ken Galente collection).



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