Lucy

A Short Story based on Historical Fact

By Maryanne Peters

My Mammy always said that I was more stubborn than a mule, so I always stayed away from mules. I won’t buy a fight if I don’t need it. But my folks knew soon enough that there was no winning an argument with their girl Lucy. Sure, I was born with something that did not belong, and without something that did, but nobody was going to tell me that I was a boy.

I was born in the small town of Waddy in Kentucky in 1886, a girl with something wrong as I told the local doctor. When the time came for me to go to school, I would be wearing a dress, just like all the other girls, or I was not going, and that is that. I was Lucy Lawson.

The doctor was a kindly man, and attended to many poor black folk at no charge. But my parents paid him, and just as well – his advice was right. He said that my folks should accept me for what I was. My Pa was more uncertain than my Mammy, but I told him that I was Lucy, and would be nobody else. So that was how they raised me.

I was a good girl, helping Mammy around the house and being a loving daughter to my Pa. I was good at school to. But things started to go bad for me at the time that children stop being children. I started turning into a monster. I just had to leave Waddy, much as loved my folks.

I went to Pecos, Texas. That was where I loved me my first man, Dwight Campenbee. He was a cowboy, and as such he knew how to deal with my problem. I begged him to do it, but he was fearful of hurting me, being that bull calves do make a noise when they lose that part. But I made no noise. That pain gave me life.

I worked as a maid at a hotel in Pecos, staying in an attic room with other girls, but soon enough I was called into the kitchen to assist there, and being the woman I am, I soon acquired further skills that would stand me in very good stead.

I had an idea in my head that Dwight and I might set up house together, but he was one of those men who exists better in the company of men, so I was disappointed in Pecos. I always say that you should leave bad places behind you, so I did that with Texas.

I moved on to Silver City, New Mexico and ran the kitchen in a small hotel there. I often say that my first husband fell in love with my cakes before he fell in love with me. Sure enough he came out to the kitchen to find the woman who had charmed his belly and he found me. Pretty soon I was charming other parts of that man, and he wanted me, wart and all. He proposed and I accepted, and that is that. I became the wife of Clarence Hicks.

We did not stay in Silver City. It was 1920. The country was wracked with the Great Depression and just when we all needed cheering up, some crazy politicians imposed the Prohibition. My employer at the time was in difficulty. There seemed to be light coming from only one direction, and that was California. It was not just where the movies were being made, in seemed like a part of our nation which could rise out of all of this.

Clarence and I settled in the town of Oxnard, California, then a successful farming community in Ventura County 60 miles west of Los Angeles and near to the sea, something I saw for the first time at the age of 34.

We had some money when money was scarce, so we were able to put a down payment on an old hotel which we turned into a boarding house. There was an empty saloon on street level which we turned into a secondhand furniture store where Clarence worked. We moved the saloon down to the basement.

One of the culinary skills that I had refined was distillation. The truth is that I knew a little about that from my childhood home in Kentucky, which is still (to my mind) where the best whiskey can be found. But I also learned the herbs that flavor other alcoholic beverages. Pretty soon we were busy most evenings.

With liquor comes women. There are plenty of folk who accuse me of being the keeper of a brothel. I deny it. I had rooms, and the rooms had beds, and we all know that beds are not just for sleeping in. But I let those rooms and did not inquire as to why some choose only a short nap, and not alone.

If some ladies chose to buy my cakes, I will never turn down a regular customer, and that is that.

I was aware and wished to be a proper resident of the town that had become my home. During the day I set about doing making myself known as a way to get day work. I decided to prove my skills and I entered and won a series of local baking contests.

There were wealthy folk in and around Oxnard despite the ravages of the depression. Soon enough I was getting work and selling some baked goods and catering dinner parties. It stood me in good stead. The second time I was arrested for being in possession of intoxicating liquors was the day before the Donlon dinner party, so Mr. Charles Donlon being an important man, made sure that I was bailed out in time to serve his guests my special braised pork hocks.

In 1929 Clarence moved on. He had never found Oxnard to be home in the same way that I had. When things go better folk were not interested in secondhand furniture and that business ended. He wanted to find work so it was time to go. It pained us both a little, but the boarding house was my business and he left me with it. I paid him some on the day he left and some a year later, and that was that.

The boarding house continued after the end of the depression and prohibition. I set up a dining room where the furniture had been displayed and I conducted my own dinner parties from there. I had developed a reputation as being something of a hostess, and being black just made the parties more exotic for my white guests.

I was styled “a Socialite” which is a word I like. I have always seen myself as sociable and with a place in society, so that word just sounds right.

For fifteen years I was a big part of the community of Oxnard, so what happened after that I reflect on with some bitterness.

In 1944 I married for a second time, to Rueben Anderson, who was a serving solider at the time of our wedding in Oxnard, but due to be discharged having served in the War. He was younger than me, I was 58 years old at the time we were married, but the war had damaged the man and what he needed was a woman like me, committed to care for him.

I was a successful woman, wealthy in my own right. It was nothing about any war pension. He served and was entitled to that. We were in love. I just became his next of kin.

I don’t know who it was who bore me the ill will to say such awful things about me, but somebody must have. Before I knew it the Police chief of Oxnard, a customer and friend, called upon me to explain that the Ventura County district attorney had decided to try me for perjury. The accusation was that when I signed the application for a marriage license I swore before God that there were “no legal objections to the marriage.” I said I knew of none, but he said that medical records had disclosed that my deformity made me a liar.

The fact is that the United States Navy has three bases in Ventura County, and my boarding house was a popular place for sailors to visit. The Navy took an interest in finding the source of a widespread venereal disease outbreak in 1942 and visited my boarding house to screen all the girls for the disease. I protested that I should not be included – I was the proprietor not a prostitute. But the choice was submit to examination or see my livelihood shut down. That is really no choice at all.

The examining doctor was a very pleasant man. He was surprised but polite. But he had to make a notation. It was his opinion, that is all.

I said it then and I say it now - I defy any doctor in the world to prove that I am not a woman. I am a woman. I have lived as a woman all my life, or my entire memory of it. There are plenty of women who are more man than I am. Some have their own medical issues.

I was convicted of perjury, but thanks to God the judge was a man of compassion and understanding. I was placed on probation for ten years.

But that evil man, the Ventura County district attorney, was not done with me, nor with Rueben either. We were both charged again – this time for fraud. It is true that I had received allotment checks as the wife of a member of the United States Army, but I never sought them. I never needed them. Still Reuben and I were both convicted of fraud and sentenced to prison. I was sent to a man’s prison, but that did not make me a man. The order that I could not wear women’s clothing while behind bars changes nothing. Nothing could, and that is that.

But the worst of it was that after my release from prison when I tried to return to my home in Oxnard, I was told that it was no longer my home.



There is a photograph that tells the story. Me with my suitcase and the chief, who I thought was my friend and some other man from the DA’s office who seemed to calling the shots. It was the last photograph taken of me in Oxnard. I never went back. Others handled the sale of my property there. I went to live in Los Angeles with my darling husband Rueben.

We never needed a marriage certificate. All that it means is that when he died last year his war pension died with him. I never needed or wanted that money. I am my own woman, and that is that.

The End

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Authors Note:

I happened upon a short YouTube piece about Lucy Hicks Anderson – link below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DKxsGP9tRY&ab_channel=We%27veBeenAround>

She is also the subject of a something in the HBO dramatized docuseries “Equal” about transgender pioneers.