

The Shared Transgender(er)

by Gary Justis

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Uncle Lou was always excited to have us visit each year. In the cooler days of the new spring, He washed the interior walls of the old farmhouse weeks prior to our arrival. Fresh flowers from his garden were carefully selected, brought indoors and graced parts of the house that had the most use.

He placed flowers next to our beds. The fragrance identified the various rooms, leaving a sacred impression of each space on our memory. The interiors, with all the harmonizing colors, shapes and smells, made one want to remain inside; still, we helped him tidy up his 25 acres during the hot afternoons, and at night Uncle Lou and I sat in the kitchen, sharing libations and spending hours looking at old photographs.

Most of the people in the photos had passed on and Uncle Lou would point to their image while repeating their name. He would close his eyes and make the sign of napping with two hands, clasped in a prayer gesture under the side of his head. I thought it might be a superstition with him, substituting for "God rest his/her soul."

Then he raised up a picture, holding it plainly in my face. I knew it had some importance when I saw Uncle Lou giving me an ornery smile. He flipped it over, admired it for a second, then he held it back towards me, pushing it closer.

It was an interesting Victorian interior with a person seated in the center of the image. The figure was dressed in traditional Victorian women's attire, holding a fan and sporting a smart hat that seemed too small for the person's head. It wasn't hard to discern the seated figure was a middle-aged man, not entirely comfortable in his clothing. The rarity of this took a moment to sink in. I looked closer and could easily tell this image was genuinely old.

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Uncle Lou calmly laid the photo down, got up and poured us a whiskey. He was still smiling, watching my reaction. He pulled a small magnifying glass from a small side drawer and laid it in front of me. I took the glass and looked more closely at the photograph. The man in the photo seemed misplaced, as if he was dressing for the photo as a dare or a joke.

I told Uncle Lou I wanted to believe the staging of this photo was not a joke or dare because I found it easy to find fascination with the unusual ways that men searched, discovered, and expressed their feminine sides. When my friends and me were younger, we were always alarmed at seeing transgender folks. My buddies thought it was wrong in the biblical sense. I didn't see it that way, but the whole thing was nearly terminally distracting.

Uncle Lou agreed it was distracting, but the way he looked at the picture with a magnifier while betraying a subtle smile told me he was fascinated.

He placed the photo on his scanner, started the copy process, and then turned towards me.

"This fellow was my great uncle. He lived this way for forty years. Most of that time was spent in an institution. Can you imagine? Locking someone up for their taste in clothes."

I was surprised at his generosity of mind.

"Well Uncle, it is a bit odd, especially for those times."

Uncle Lou was quiet for a moment. Then he brightened.

"This man was a captain in the Union Army. He met Lincoln!"

Both points grabbed my interest.

"Then he was suffering from PTSD or something like that?"

Uncle Lou stiffened slightly.

"No, he just liked the way it made him feel; at least Dad said as much. When he passed, they laid him out in the loveliest gown...all white. It's what he wanted."

"Man! Did he also have feminine makeup on?"

"Yes, but he was very old by then. I was a boy. I remember thinking his face looked like a clown."

We both sat silent for a few moments, and then I told Uncle Lou I thought it (trans-gendering) looked like a thoughtful way of occupying the world. It was a personal triumph, for some individuals, over the destructive affects of denial. Besides, it hurt no one, and it didn't destroy property. I always felt any kind of non-destructive, personal expression without fear was like High Art.

Uncle Lou took a swig of his whiskey, swallowed hard, and sat down at the table where all the photos were spread.

"I agree with you, at least in an ideal sense. But sometimes conquering ones denial does destroy...families anyway. Any lifestyle is a series of compromise, in more ways than anyone can imagine."

We fell silent again. Uncle Lou picked up a piece of junk mail from Sears. He smiled as he discovered a sale item he was interested in. He folded the coupon in line with its margins, and gently tore along the lines of the small colorful rectangle.

"Is that what happened to you and Aunt Mary?"

"What?"

"Did you find you had to compromise too much?"

"Something like that." Uncle Lou was rubbing his face the way he did when he was suddenly tired. He took a very long breath, and blew it out affecting a whispering sigh.

"Wait here."

He got up and went to another part of the house. I heard a dresser drawer open. There was a pause, and then it slid shut with a slight wooden thump.

"Here!"

As he sat back down he spun a small snapshot onto the table in front of me. I picked it up and saw the image of a middle- aged woman. She looked like she was straining to pose in a playful position, holding her balance against an exotic tree. It had the feel of a 60's or 70's tourist photo. She was attractive, and obviously delighted at something.

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"So, you had a girlfriend?"

"Girlfriend?"

"Yeah, this one you took a picture of."

"When this picture was taken, it was a period of my life when I was truly happy...this was an arrangement many men dream about, your Aunt Mary took this picture."

Now I was the one with the ornery smile. A Mormon joke entered my mind, but I kept it to myself.

"So, Uncle Lou, you were doubling up on the old female companion thing."

He chuckled. *"Turn the picture over."*

When I flipped the picture over I saw the words *"Mexico, 1969, Louise."*

I felt blood leave my face, followed by a slight dizziness. Uncle Lou poured a large glass of water and stood in the center of the kitchen waiting for me to recover some composure.

"Well?" he wanted to plug the fat silence.

"Well what?"

"Do you understand now?"

I looked down for a moment, abruptly feeling much better.

"I do understand. I wouldn't care how much I loved my spouse, I would leave anyone who stretched out my clothes like that!"

Our laughter tested the strength of the windows around the house. Uncle Lou disappeared into a different room again. I heard the same dresser drawer, and watched as he re-entered the kitchen carrying several old photo albums. He took a seat at the table as I got up to pour two more shots of whiskey. I never would have expected the way the fragrance of the liquor would so easily harmonize with the subtle floral perfume that hung the air.

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