

Luther Loves Lucy

by Matt Lubich

Luther Mishmash stood numbly in the yard, dumbly staring at the soiled pair of underpants flapping lazily in the breeze on the wash line. Grandpa had wet himself again. Tomorrow, at school, he knew he'd hear about it. Luther wasn't sure which was more humiliating; to let the other kids go on thinking that at 13 he still wet his pants, or to tell them that inside his house, half-blind, eating Oreos and watching cartoons all day, sat his incontinent grandfather.

As much as Luther hated school, he loathed the hours between its dismissal and dinner even more. From 3 o'clock until his mother's voice announced meatloaf and salvation, he haunted Lilac Lane like an acne-ridden Phantom of the Opera. To just sit inside the house was out of the question. His mother's pitying glances as she busied herself with housework. Her probing questions about whether he wouldn't rather be outside on such a nice afternoon. How he longed to be part of the neighborhood pick-up football game, but how he feared the ridicule that his athletic ineptitude would foster if he was.

Such was life, when you were the ugliest guy in the seventh grade.

Lucy Montalongo stared down into the deep-fat fryer, rivulets of sweat beading on her nose, hanging for a moment, then falling into the bubbling grease. Sometimes, she fantasized about plunging her head in the scalding liquid. She wondered if it'd hurt, or if death would be quick, painless and forever. With her luck, she thought, she wouldn't die. She'd just have to go to school the next day and endure the taunts of her classmates, not to mention the fact that her dad would be mad because she had ruined a batch of chicken.

Lucy didn't mind working after school. It gave her a reason why she couldn't accept all the teenage invitations that she dreamed someday would be extended to her. Dad needed her here. Business wasn't good enough to hire any help. She glanced at the front counter where her father stood. Oh God! Was that Cindy Armageddon and her friends, Alicia and Valerie? The popular girls.

Their hair and skin so perfect, desirability and social affluence exuding from every pore of their bodies while she stood frying chicken, her hair limp and sticking to her forehead. They saw her, quickly glanced at each other, and smirked.

"Hi Lucy," they squealed as they picked up their orders and went to a table. Sitting down, they leaned close together, whispered something, cast another glance back at her, then broke into a chorus of giggles.

Lucy didn't mind working after school. He dad needed her. And anyway, what other fate could be expected for the ugliest girl in the seventh grade?

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The halls of Jack Ruby Junior High were deserted at this time of the morning. That's why Luther liked it so much. He could walk down the center of the linoleum--past the trophy case with the legend 'The Fighting Avengers' emblazoned in blood red paint on the glass--before the halls were yet again filled with the packs of hard-cases and 'in' kids, and Luther was forced once more into the cold metal periphery of the lockers and his nerdism.

He looked down at his new pants, wondering if today's fashion statement would be the one. Luther was positive that clothes were what he needed to become one of them, but which clothes? He tried to mimic what he saw the Jocks and Faces wearing, but on him, it just looked wrong. Or did it? That was the problem, he thought. He wasn't sure what looked good, or when he looked good. The colors were the same, the style similar, but whenever he looked in the mirror, all he saw was himself. Luther hoped it was something as simple as clothes, or a hair style. That he could buy. If it was more than that, something darker and deeper, then he was sunk.

"Hey Luther, nice pants"

A group of kids whisked by. He could tell by the sarcastic tone and the howls of laughter that they weren't serious, but any retort he may have been able to think of would be lost on them as they swept on, filling the corridor from locker to locker. As quickly as they had

arrived, they were gone, and Luther was sunk. He started slowly toward first-hour, making sure to stay well to one side of the hall.

Outside school, Lucy ran across the dirt parking lot, hoping that she still had time to get to her locker and then to class. She wasn't so much afraid of making the teacher mad by being tardy, as she was terrified by the prospect of walking into the classroom after everyone else had sat down; when all eyes would be on her entrance. She side-stepped a piece of broken glass so as to not scuff her Cindy Armageddon style boots; only to plant one foot squarely in a mud puddle, splattering brownish water all over one leg of her Cindy Armageddon--but three sizes larger--imitation jeans.

Lucy stopped, closing her eyes and wishing that she could re-live the last five seconds--if not the first 13 years--of her life over. Then she began to trot towards the doors as the last bell rang.

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The cold, steel-blue eyes of Mr. Rheinlander raked the first-hour history class like machine gun fire from left to right, as the early-morning sunlight glinted off the gun-metal grey of his crew cut. Dramatically, he paused for a moment before continuing.

"On balance," he said, letting loose another burst, 'the Nazis really weren't that bad a bunch of guys."

Deloyd Rheinlander liked to pace when he taught. Slow, deliberate, measured steps; his cowboy boot heels making rhythmic clicks on the floor before he made a quick, precise turn and headed in the other direction.

"Do you want to know why the Germans were painted as so evil in the history books?" he asked the 30 blank, terrified faces. "Because they lost! If you little weasels learn nothing else in this class, remember that history does not look fondly on losers or the weak. It's the victors that write the history books, painting it with their own, chosen let us say, point of view.

"You see," he said with a slight smile, "It's all a matter of semitics....Did I say semitics? Of course I meant semantics."

With half-an-hour to go in class, Mr. Rheinlander told the students to pair-up and see what proof they could find that Franklin Roosevelt

was a homosexual. As usual, the boyfriends and girlfriends quickly shoved their desks together, and the other socially-confident kids matched with their like. And as usual, there were that half-dozen or so kids who just sat; frightened and frozen like deer caught in the headlights of a semi-truck moments before impact; immobile at the prospect of having to find someone willing to be their partner.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Rheinlander said, exasperated by their feebleness. "Just find someone. You, pair up with you. And you," he said, pointing at Luther, "you pair up with you," he said, looking at Lucy.

The next moment was like a dream. Separately, both of them were sure they'd seen this somewhere before--maybe in one of those late-show movies that they both watched; huddled alone in front of the bathing rays of their televisions. Except, instead of a field of flowers, they were simultaneously scooting their desks across the room towards each other. They drew closer and closer, until finally, their desktops met in a metallic clang that only barely drowned out the sound of the beating of their hearts in their ears.

"So, do you think Roosevelt was a homosexual?" Lucy quietly asked.

"I don't know," Luther said, stumbling over his own thoughts and words. "I thought he was a Democrat."

Later, Lucy would tell Luther that this was the first thing that attracted her to him; his sense of humor. This puzzled him, but not enough to chance fate by asking what she meant. Now, all he did was smile, which bounced off Lucy's face and back into his, as they both shyly turned the pages of their history books and stole glances at each other as the remaining minutes of first-hour ticked away. Maybe, just maybe, they thought, they now had someone to walk to second-hour with.

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Luther and Lucy had never noticed how many cracks there were in the concrete sidewalk on the way home from school. They walked, eyes downcast, afraid that if they looked up, the other might not actually be there. Communication--especially regarding affairs of the

heart--was difficult at this age without the intermediaries that everyone else had. Neither of them had a friend who could approach the other and reveal that they had heard that Luther might like Lucy, if in fact, Lucy liked Luther. Without this adolescent, romantic diplomatic corps, they were left to their own devices and probing conversation.

Does she really like me? Luther wondered. He had in fact walked to her second-hour class with her, but then, when he saw her again after fourth-hour, she didn't seem that interested in walking to lunch with him. But, she had said that she walked home this way, and if he wanted to, they could walk together. Did that mean anything?

It meant that Lucy was going to be late for work. The restaurant was in the opposite direction, but how could she say no when he asked if this was the way she was going? Hadn't she almost blown it, she thought to herself, when he had asked if she was going to lunch and she has said no; terrified by the idea of letting him see her eat?

"Do you like Mr. Biester?" Lucy asked.

Panic folded over Luther like a wave, drowning him with indecision. Felix Biester was one of the English teachers and according to almost everyone, a notorious psychopath. He had spent a good part of World War II in a Japanese POW camp; the steel-plate in his skull one of the mementos he brought back from his time in the Pacific. Every December 7, his classroom was dark when the kids came in--Mr. Biester sitting at his desk staring glumly over the rim of his glasses. He would sit for what seemed an eternity; long enough to even make a room full of hormone-laden teenagers so uneasy that they fell silent.

"There will be no learning today," he would finally say. "In 1941, we learned enough on this day to last a lifetime." With that, he would simply sit there in the dark, softly whistling the Marine Hymn to himself, while the kids passed notes back and forth, slept, or simply got up and walked out.

Luther didn't know if he liked Mr. Biester. He knew he was terrified of him, but not as afraid as he was of saying the wrong

thing now. The important thing wasn't whether he liked Mr. Biester, he thought, it was whether or not Lucy did.

"What do you think of him," he asked, hoping to gauge what he should say.

"He's kind of sad I think," Lucy replied. "I mean, spending all that time in that prisoner of war camp, you know, and having the Japanese hit him in the head with that shovel and all."

"He is kind of sad, isn't he?" Luther replied.

"But he's also sort of weird," she added.

"Yeah, sad and weird," Luther said, feeling like a mouse that turns left to avoid a cat, only to find a steel, spine-breaking trap in his path. They walked for a moment in silence, trying to think of other things to ask, when all either really wanted to know was "do you like me?" Before long, they were in front of Luther's house. Silently and devoutly, he thanked God that grandpa had been able to control his bladder today.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow at school," he said.

"Okay," Lucy said. "Sometimes I come a little early, you know, before classes start. Maybe we could talk before Mr. Rheinlander's class."

Grandpa had not wet himself today, but when she said that, Luther almost did.

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Slowly, over the next two weeks, Luther and Lucy built what, if they were older, they'd probably call 'a relationship.' To them, however, it was a nightmare. Like trying to build a bridge across the Grand Canyon out of sand. For every look, every comment that they believed cemented their interest in each other, there were as many remarks, as many things, that made them believe that they were doomed.

Like last Saturday at the Bowl-o-Rink. The bowling alley, encircled by a giant roller-skating rink, was the social Mecca for teenagers. An air of desperation and danger filled the atmosphere--partly because at any moment a stray bowling ball could jump the alleys and cut your legs out from under you while skating--but more so because of

the chance for romantic success or failure that the whole place held. Luther and Lucy couldn't remember how many times they had stood on the edge of the rink like stone golems, waiting for someone to ask them to skate during couples-only. Or at least, for the song to mercifully end and the lights to come back up, so they could lose themselves once more in the sea of churning legs.

Friday afternoon at school, they had agreed to meet at noon the next day. Luther had stood in front of the Bowl-o-Rink for hours waiting for her to show up his hair parted just like he'd seen the captain of the swim team part his, and the razor-sharp seams of his new jeans cutting lines into his thighs.

Lucy's dad had told her that she could get off at eleven on Saturday, but then the call had come in for the 65 Poultry Packs and she was trapped frying breasts and wings while the tears ran down her face, as Luther stood across town, nonchalantly trying to pretend that he was suppose to be standing there alone.

She had called that night, true, and apologized profusely for breaking the date, but he wondered. That was the problem. While both of them now felt like they had someone in their lives, nothing official had been said. They walked to classes together and Lucy had even consented to sit with him one day at lunch, although she refused to eat; saying she had a diabetes test later that afternoon. But at no time had it even been announced that they were "going steady."

Even though nothing was official, the teenage jungle drums of the social order had begun to talk. The mocking glances were coming more often, and the little innuendoes, like when Charlie Bass yelled, "Luther's porking Lucy" during The Citizenship Day assembly, were coming more often.

Well, desperate times call for desperate actions Luther thought as he stood alone in the middle of the football field. He hoped no one had heard the breaking glass when he smashed the window to get into the school, but he had to put the ring in Lucy's locker before doing this. That way, if it didn't work out, if he was shot down by the

police or something, she'd know why he was doing it, and what it meant.

The acrid smell of gasoline filled his nostrils as he finished pouring it along the grass. Tomorrow, everyone would know. He struck a match and dropped it, the flames igniting and brightening the pitch black darkness. Quickly, he turned and ran towards home, the outline of the letters beginning to glow in the grass.

L U T H E R L O V E S L U C Y

No one was exactly sure how what happened the next day happened. There was a lot of conjecture at the trial, but nobody could really provide an accurate account of what led to what.

Luther hadn't thought about the fact that the fire would burn the grass around where he poured the gasoline. The small blaze would fairly obliterate the message--strangely leaving the word LOVE intact however--and only the L of Lucy's name could be clearly discernible. Probably, the police told the principal, it was some damn Satanists. And obviously, the sign was suppose to say something about the love of Lucifer.

But the kids knew exactly what it said. The ones that had Luther and Lucy in Mr. Rheinlander's class saw their hurried conversation in the hall before class, and how Lucy grabbed Luther's hand. And then, of course, there was the ring on Lucy's finger.

That's what a lot of people said started it. Kids wanting to see the ring. After school as Lucy walked to work, three guys had begun to follow her, shouting for her to let them see it. She only started walking faster. Soon, the three were joined by two more, then five more. When she broke into a run, they immediately gave chase. She thought maybe she could lose them down around the cliffs by the railroad tracks, but in her headlong dash, she didn't see how precarious the earth was above the tracks below. As she reached the edge she realized her mistake, but it was too late. For a moment, she was suspended in the air--the blue of the imitation sapphire in the ring catching the dying afternoon light for one brilliant second--before she tumbled to the rushing train below.

Everyone at the trial admitted it was a tragedy. Especially since Lucy's body had been so mangled that only bits and pieces of it could ever be found. But, like one parent said outside the courthouse after the 'not guilty' verdict came down, at least it wasn't Cindy Armageddon. She had a promising modeling career ahead of her.

And yes, people had to agree, the sight of Luther Mishmash walking alone along the tracks late a night was pitiful, but, well...you know, kids will be kids. Teen-steam, that's what one of the expert witnesses for the defense called it. With the volatile physical as well as mental changes that teenagers go through, he explained to the jury, you just had to expect that one was going to explode now and then.

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"C'mon Luther, show it to us."

Luther squinted into the setting sun. Or was it setting? Lately, his eyes were getting so bad that he couldn't really tell. Even if he couldn't see anymore, he could remember. Lilac Lane couldn't have changed that much in 70 years. He sat, warmed by the afternoon sun, tightly clutching his shoebox, palsied hands drumming rhythmically on its lid.

Slowly, he raised the cardboard cover, the two teenagers staring with awe at its contents. "My treasure," he called it. He had never married, never really even had a girlfriend as far as anyone knew. He seemed content to play the trumpet in the Salvation Army Band until he just got too old. Now, he said, he'd just sit here on the porch until he died. He had his treasure and two weeks of wonderful memories out of 83 years of life, he told people. It wasn't much, he admitted, but it was his. And what more could the ugliest kid in the seventh grade expect?

"See, I told you," one of the kids said.

"Is it really a hand?" the other asked. "What's that on the finger?"

Dedicated to Lesli Bangert, who I've always looked up to, even though I'm taller than her.

