Heading East

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

The truth is that while I was born out there, west of the Pecos River, the life there was not to my liking, and I knew it from a young age. I was smaller than all the boys and not interesting in getting scratched and bruised in their rough games. I disliked horses as I had been bitten by one when I was small, and the fact is that I preferred to help my mother around the house. Because I had two older brothers my father was happy enough to let me do that, but I would never be his favorite. It was not as if that counted for much with him, but I worshipped my father.

When I came time for me to finish with schooling both of my parents worried that I would not be able to find work, being as how I was unskilled in ranch work and slight of build. It was suggested that I might find employment at the general store (where my mother helped part time) or even in the telegraph office, being as how I could count and read better than most.

“You need to take some advantage of the fact that you are such a tidy person,” my mother would say. She liked to call me “homely” which is not a description any man in my town would be happy with, except perhaps me.

Then Colonel Lambeth and his daughter Merrill came into town and took over the homestead of one of the biggest ranches in our valley. That changed everything for me, and I mean everything.

The ranch was owned by the Colonel. In fact, he owned a few, but the biggest was in the Felix River Valley in New Mexico, not far from our town. Up until he arrived the Colonel ran a huge meat-packing business in the great city of Chicago, but by all accounts the cold winter weather up there was said to be bad for his health, so he was advised to move to a dryer climate.

When he arrived we all assumed that the person by his side was his son “Rill”, because his daughter had chosen to wear men’s clothes from the time she arrived. The reason was simple – she had discovered that women west of the Pecos River were there to be harassed if not assaulted. The men of my town are no better - no manners at all. She could not have known that, because when she arrived she was Rill Lambeth, a city boy maybe, but ready to become a cowboy.

For Rill it seemed easier to be a man, and somehow she was able to pull that off better that I ever had been able. It seemed that we were about the same age and she sought my advice on some things but when she sat astride a horse she was up to the task. I was never that person.

About her being female, I knew nothing more than anybody else, least of all the local rascal Peter “Pecos” who seemed to take to “the boy” in a way that maybe embarrassed him a bit. But after a few adventures that others may speak of, Rill finally took off her cowboy hat and revealed her beautiful hair and she quickly won the heart of Pecos Smith, if she did not have it already. It seemed like everybody felt there was something not quite right about the new kid, but that was with what they call hindsight.

The boy Rill was in fact, the Colonel’s pretty daughter Merrill, although she never used that name again. She is still Rill, but very definitely a woman these days. The fact is that she likes to ride beside Pecos and live a cowboy’s life rather than attend to the huge homestead on the ranch that her father has said belongs to them both as a wedding present.

Pecos Smith used to joke with Rill about “living West of the Pecos is the life for you”. He was talking about the river rather than himself, but then again he also liked the phrase “don’t cross the Pecos” and I am guessing that meant him.

When the colonel complained on a visit to the General Store that the homestead on the ranch desperately needed the attention of a “more homely person” than his daughter, my mother suggested me. I would not have been interested if it had not been for the fact that the colonel liked me and I liked him, and he offered a good wage.

I had found my calling, as they say. Rill had done nothing to make the homestead a home, but I relished doing just that. I set about getting things just so, and I achieved that in less than a month.

Rill said that I was a housekeeper. That is a woman’s role and she said that in a city like Chicago it pays well, but there was no such thing as a male housekeeper. She even said that their house in Chicago could do with my attention. The colonel was reluctant to sell it and did not like the idea of leasing it out, but he agreed that if I were “a conventional housekeeper” he would be happy to put me to work there.

I have to say that I longed to move from New Mexico to Chicago. I really felt that I had been born into the wrong place, or the wrong place and time. Life in a cattle town suited a certain kind of man, and I was not that kind. Rill knew that too – she was now I suppose “a cowgirl” or more correctly a cow lady. The home life was not for her.

I joked that if only we could have traded places. I would get to live in a cultured city and wear fine clothes, attend the theatre and visit art galleries and tea houses, and she could have lived the life she was already living.

“Well, your hair is long enough, so don’t cut it,” she laughed. “And I am sure that we could squeeze you into a corset.”

“Frankly, changing my sex would be no hardship just to get out of this place and live a different life East of the Pecos,” I said. I think that she could see the longing in my eyes.

Then Rill and Pecos Smith got married, and Rill got pregnant soon after. My mother said that getting pregnant forces a woman to rethink things – it is in the chemistry. Womenfolk that are expecting take more interest in their house. Some call it “the nesting instinct”. Anyway, as Rill put it, I was free to take up the offer of heading to Chicago in the pay of the Colonel. When there I could report to Clyde Corbin, the family lawyer who had been betrothed to Rill but returned East when she struck things up with Pecos Smith.

“If you are going to do the job of a housekeeper in Chicago you need to look the part,” she said. “And what is more, if you really want to experience a great city it is best be done as a fine lady.” It was something that she knew very well. She said – “I am what they call a tomboy.” It was the first time I had heard the word. She said “But they I endured the lessons in my childhood, and If they could make a woman out of me then I could certainly do it for you”.

It helped that we were the same size, although my body had never been cinched by a corset before. She had a few such items and dresses that she said were mine now – she had in mind more practical clothing as a woman rancher.

“There are plenty more pretty things back in the house in Chicago” she said. “You are close enough to my size, so borrow what you need. Let me just give you a few tips on how to co-ordinate a look. This is very important in the city, but thankfully we have no time for that stuff out in the west.”

I have to say that when I ran my hands over those beautiful things I had some strange thoughts. Looking back I think they were driven by my love of beautiful things. In that place it seemed like beauty could be found in sunsets and fields of wild flowers, but not much else. Before I saw Rill on her wedding day it seemed that even pretty girls had their beauty hidden behind practical dresses and simple hairstyles. It seemed that trues beauty was to be found in the illustrations in one of those New York City “magazines” that were only just getting started, with dresses like Rill’s.

I suppose that being raised in a New Mexico town you understand that world has been designed to suit men, so no man would think of living a woman’s life, which is what put Rill into denim pants. But the way that she described it, in Chicago it was the other way around. A city was a woman’s domain, if you are rich that is, and I could at least appear rich.

“The household is for the Colonel to pay for,” she said. “But a woman of class in Chicago should not have to pay for anything else. That life does not interest me anymore, but I would love for you to experience it.”

I still had doubts, but they were dispelled in spectacular fashion. She set to work transforming me from a Texan boy into looking like a lady who would be at home of the streets of Chicago or New York City, and when she was done I was shocked. The boy had disappeared. There was a new me, and I wanted to be called Louise, after the princess.

Back in those days, my mother and other womenfolk could not her enough about the royal family of England, and the Princess Louise was born in the same month I was. She was regarded as Queen Victoria’s prettiest daughter, but she was also a little rebellious, and I liked that. I wanted to be like her – a princess.

First, I had to explain to my parents that Colonel Lambeth was sending me to Chicago to find work, and I wanted to seek my fortune, just like in the fairy tales. My father was quick to agree, and my mother was after a few tears. Rill was to take me to the railhead, but instead we went back to her house to make the final changes before I boarded the train.

I had been brought up with brothers, so I knew little about female anatomy, but Rill was ready to show me.

“That is why women sit down to pee,” she explained. “And that is where men stick their spickets, although some women prefer to take that in the butthole to avoid pregnancy. But our task is to hide what you have and find flesh on your chest enough for a bust. Fine ladies need to have a bust of some kind.”

Fine ladies need long hair too, and while mine was full and thick, it was not too long. Still, there was enough to allow for what I had to be drawn up and a bun made of horsehair to go on top, which is why I have roan colored hair to this day.

I had the lessons in etiquette such as she had received as the daughter of a respectable businessman, but while she had resisted that, I welcomed it. I was ready to do this, and my only fear was of being discovered to be a man beneath the skirts. Learning the voice and movements of a woman were totally necessary for the adventure I was planning.

So, it was a week later that I got aboard the train and set off for Chicago.

“I have telegraphed Clyde Corbin to meet you at the station,” said Rill. “Don’t worry – I have told him nothing about you. He knows you only as Louise, a girl from New Mexico looking to experience life as a lady.”

We waved to one another furiously as women might, because she was one, and now I was one too. I certainly felt that I was when I leaned back and arranged my skirts over my shaved legs, and checked a glimpse of my reflection in the window as we passed the water tower.

My adventure had begun.

We were barely a rifle shot out of my town before a man came over and asked to sit across from me. I had never been asked such a question before, so I had to allow him. He then started asking me so many questions that I wish I had refused him, but it did give me the chance to tell the story that I would stay with in times to come.

I explained that I was of New Mexico born and bred, a farmer’s daughter, raised right and in the Christian faith. I had through domestic duties earned the patronage of Colonel Lambeth lately of Chicago and now of New Mexico, and I was travelling to his property in the state of Illinois to improve my education. I believed that a young lady should be modest and chaste, and it was not in my nature to talk to strangers, and for that reason I would not engage further.

This man was not the first and certainly not the last, even on that fairly short first journey, and I suppose that with each telling of my story I found myself smiling in a way that many men might consider suggestive. It was not my intention to do that. Clearly my clothing concealed a secret that might put me in some danger. It was just that I was beginning to enjoy the attention, and I was becoming aware that I was perhaps, slightly more attractive than the average woman who was born in the proper form.

So it was that when I alighted from the train in Chicago I had three gentlemen following me closely and offering to guide me through the city, right up until I came face to face with Clyde Corbin who was standing on the platform to meet me.

I recognized him from a photographic image that he had sent Rill in the days when they were betrothed. To the disappointment of my followers who had been carrying my bags, I went up to him and introduced myself as “Louise”. He was appropriately disapproving of my entourage and he sent them away.

“Please forgive me, Mr. Corbin,” I said. “Shucks, I am a country girl from a town where a man would be ridiculed for attending upon a lady as those gentlemen were doing. I am wholly inexperienced in such matters.”

“I understand” he said. “I still think of sweet and tender Merrill living in that place and dealing with men without manners and morals. It appalls me.”

“She seems happy enough, Sir,” I said. “But I agree with you. I could not wait to get out of that place. As for my morals, I am secure, I assure you, but as for my manners, I will need to work on those.”

He smiled, which it seemed to me was not something he did readily do, or at least not of late. He said – “The Lambeth house has been closed up since Merrill and her father left, but I have been told that you should open it. I doubt it is to receive her back, but the truth is that I pine for her no longer. I have discovered that my desires lie elsewhere.”

“Miss Lambeth has only promised me the opportunity to live as a lady for a while,” I said. I hope that the house is small.”

“It is a long way from that,” he said. “It is a huge house and needs a large number of servants even to to cater for a single resident. Perhaps it might be better if you stay with me and my mother at our home … for the time being?”

“I would not wish to be a burden, Mr. Corbin,” I said. “If would be happy to stay in servants quarters in the Lambeth house …”.

“I apologize for interrupting, but I must insist you stay with us until you have seen what I am talking about. My mother will be able to assist you in getting into society in this town. Chicago is not like other cities in the East – It is accepting of newcomers, but knowing people is the key. Please Miss Louise, let us help you.”

“It’s just Louise,” I said.

“Not here it isn’t,” he said, quite abruptly. Then he must have seen that I was taken aback because he added – “But I would be happy to address you that way, Louise.”

By that point we had reached the carriage and we took a short ride from the railway station to the fine street where the Corbin house was to be found. All the way I spent most of the time with my head out the window marveling at everything I could see. The buildings seemed so massive, and the doorways seemed built for giants. You needed to stoop to enter the house I was born in, and I thought the homestead at the Lambeth Ranch was grand, but it was nothing like what I saw in Chicago, and a whole street of them.

I was still slack jawed when I walked into his hallway.

“The Lambeth House is ten times the size of this, Louise,” he said.

His mother came out to meet us from the kitchen, but she had not been there to cook – she had her own servant to do that, and the man who drove the coach performed other duties.

“So, I am to help make a lady out of you?” she said. “Well, it seems that I have good fabric to work with given that you are so young and pretty.”

“Well, thank you Ma’am,” I said trying to look shy, although inside I was excited beyond all measure. “Hopefully you can help knock off the rough edges a little. I am as keen as a whip to get started.”

“Well, you can start by avoiding country phrases,” she said firmly. “A young woman of a grand city like Chicago should speak in a proper fashion. Follow my lead, my dear. I won’t be offended if you even imitate me, if you can do that?”

“I shall try,” I said as politely as I could, watching her severe expression turn into a smile that warmed me to her immediately.

“I shall help you to unpack and see what you have brought with you,” she said. “That dress is quite presentable, but my guess is that you have been wearing it for some time. The cologne you have been using cannot hide that fact. I will have a bath drawn for you, and help you scrub off the stagecoach.”

I immediately realized that I was in trouble. If she saw me naked or anywhere near that state, she would learn my secret and my adventure would be over. But how long could I hide the facts in the home I was living in? I was determined to just carry on and detail with a crisis when it came – it was the way I had been brought up.

She had my bag brought up to the room I would be living in and she looked at Rill’s other dresses with grudging approval.

“I will never understand that girl, Merrill,” she said. “I might have said that it was down to the early demise of her mother, but the fact is that she had always had romantic notions about the wild west. Such a pretty girl, but she was bound never to be a lady, I think. You seem quite the opposite, Louise. Fancy that, born on the dusty prairies and looking to become the true lady her friend would never be. What a wonderful dream for you to have. Let’s make it come true.”

“It is all I have ever dreamed of, Mrs. Corbin,” I said, dreamily.

“Why don’t you call me Mother, my darling,” she said. My heart was melting in my flat padded chest

A copper bath had been placed in my room by the fire and filled with buckets of water – some hot and some cold. She tested it to make sure that it was just right. Then she said – “Let me help get you out of those things.”

It seemed to me that it was like I was on a wagon with crazed horses about to ride off the cliff of a canyon, but the way I figured it that ride was such a thrill I was going to stay on until the end. So off came the dress and the underskirts and then the corset, with the padding falling away too. I was standing just in a cotton slip, and I could see that she was confused.

“Oh Mother,” I said. “I have a dreadful secret to disclose to you. My dream that you spoke about, means so much to me, but my tragedy is that it will never come true. I can never be that lady, as much as I want it to be.”

I let the slip fall to the floor and I stood before her naked - pale and stripped of body hair but with my boyish chest and my small male parts clearly visible.

“Clyde should have told me,” she said. She did not seem to be angry – at least not with me. I was puzzled at her response.

“He doesn’t know,” I said.

“Really?” she said in disbelief. Then her smile slowly returned. “Oh, how delightful!”

By now I was really confused, and she could see it.

“Get into the bath dear, because while I help wash you I have something to explain to you,” she said.

I just followed her directions. She had something called a loofah which she used to scrub the dried sweat from my back and from my armpits, and then my non-female chest.

“The thing is that when Clyde followed Merril out to New Mexico, I hoped that I was wrong about him. You see my son has the affliction of homosexuality. I think that he was genuinely attracted to Merrill, but perhaps on because she was boyish. When he came back I am afraid that he fully indulged his perversion – dangerously so. I want nothing more that for Clyde to find somebody to love and commit to in a permanent way, and I hoped that he would find a woman who could accept his sexual preference, but that seems impossible. And then you walk in the door – apparently the very kind of woman I would wish for him, and perhaps with the body he prefers?”

I was about to say something like – “Oh no, I am not that way inclined” but I decided not to say anything. For a start I was not certain of that fact. I loved to look at women, but now that I had spent some time dressed as one I realized that my viewing of them might be driven more by envy than by lust. I had always been a home person – more like a housewife by inclination. As for cowboys that I had worked with, I was never attracted to them given their rough ways, but Clyde Corbin was somebody very different.

“Clyde is a very attractive man,” I said – the thought just rolling out of my head and onto my tongue like that out-of-control wagon.

“And he really has no idea? How delightful. We will need to make you look as pretty as possible, my dear. Now, let’s wash this hair of yours. I love the color but I can see that you are using a hairpiece. I am sue that we can do better. I use something like this myself so I will send out for something in this color but human hair.”

As she went to work I felt that for the first time in my life I was truly at home. I seemed as if I was myself, naked in the bath – a boy from the neck down but a woman in my head and on my face.

Mother was about to introduce me to cosmetics. Of course, I knew of such things but for my journey I had relied on my fresh face and natural feminine features, but now I learned that color and highlighting the eyes with kohl can add beauty even to the prettiest girl. By the time that I was dressed and downstairs and Clyde was due to arrive home, I was simply stunning to look at.

I could see that Clyde was impressed. He still had eyes for feminine beauty even though his loins may have directed him elsewhere.

“Even though it is a weekday we should have some wine with dinner,” Mother said. We drank while she told Clyde her plans for me to tour the City of Chicago with her. “And then I want a party for Louise before the end of the month. It will be a coming out party for her, and welcoming party for the city, and I hope that it might be something else … an engagement party perhaps? Look at her Clyde – she is so beautiful and so concerned with improving herself – it is something you have always approved of. She would be perfect for you.”

“Mother, you and I have spoken about this at length,” Clyde snapped, cutting her short.

“She knows,” said Mother. “I told her.”

“Mother, how could you?” he wailed. “I am a respected attorney in this town. My personal life must remain a secret. How could you?”

“But it won’t remain a secret if you don’t settle down with the right partner,” she said. “Louise is that partner – I firmly believe it.”

Clyde Corbin turned to me, his face in clear torment. He said – “Louise, I am sorry, but whatever your ambitions might be, we cannot be married. I don’t know what my mother has told you, but suffice to say I cannot give you the love you need, I cannot be a father to your children, I cannot marry you and ruin your life. As much as I admire and respect you for what you are doing to find a place here, you are missing something that I need.”

“If it’s what I think it is, then I have one of those,” I said.

Now he was the one looking puzzled. I have to say it made me smile.

“It’s true,” said Mother. “Seated at our table maybe the one woman in he world who might be your match – female on the outside, but something else under that pretty gown.”

Well, if you are expecting the sordid details of how Clyde Corbin came to verify the facts as described then you have me wrong. I am a lady and ladies don’t speak of such things. The only thing that need be said is that we came to truly know one another that very night, and if I was not a lady before that night then I woke up as one in the morning.

There was indeed tours of the city and the shops, and before the end of the month there was an engagement party in Lambeth House. I only wish that Colonel Lambeth and Rill and Pecos Smith could have been there, but in those days New Mexico was a long way from Chicago.

Clyde took great delight in telling the gentlemen of Chicago that his wife-to-be was a real cowgirl, who could rope a steer and shoot that head of a rattlesnake with a six-gun and 20 paces.

“That’s was a cowgirl,” I had to interrupt. “From now on all I want to be in the wife of the most successful attorney in the city, and to entertain as we are doing tonight.

Still, somebody asked whether I could use the bull whip the Colonel had hanging in his study, so I showed him by taking the cigar clean out of his mouth from across the room. The applause was loud and warm and many a man slapped Clyde on the back and commended his masculinity for taking on a creature such as I.

But I never did that trick again. I was determined to become a cultured woman and learn about the opera and go to Paris and London and find good charitable work to do. When you are married to the most successful attorney in Chicago you have to behave in a manner expected of you.

My parents came to the wedding. The invitation must have come as a shock, but it arrived with a letter of explanation and two train tickets. I could have invited my brothers too, but I knew they would be unlikely to come. How would they explain that their brother was a bride?

Clyde and I did head out west once, and my brothers accepted me as their lady cousin from Chicago. But the purpose of the journey was to close the deal with Colonel Lambeth to buy his grand house in our home city, Clyde now being able to afford it. It was as if my dream had come true. I now had the grand home that I wanted to look after, and the person to love living there with me.

I never went back to New Mexico again, and I guess that I never will.

The End

Author’s Note: “West of the Pecos” was a story by Zane Grey with many of the characters in this story, but focusing on Rill Lambeth who dressed as a man to live a cowboy’s life until Pecos Smith stole her heart and Clyde Corbin hightailed it back east. Call this story a sequel of sorts, by way of giving the rejected groom a classic Peters happy ending.

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