

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE 2: NEW YORK CITY

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucille There was a shooting in the backyard of Lucille Ball's childhood home on the July 4th weekend of 1927. Lucy was 15 years old. Lucy's grandfather - Grandpa Hunt - was overseeing target practice. A little girl who was visiting took her turn and pulled the trigger. A neighbor boy ran right in the line of fire. His name was Warner Erickson. He was eight years old. The bullet lodged in his back. Warner didn't die that day. The bullet severed his spinal cord. He was paralyzed and in a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

The mind is slow to comprehend something so shocking. Something so terrible, even if it happens right in front of you. Grandpa Hunt was a vibrant 60-year-old man at the time. It seemed like he was never able to wrap his head around what happened that day.

CLEO SMITH: And he just became an old man after that.

FRED BALL: And Lucy, by the way, was not there at that particular incident and she was not knowledgeable about anything specific that happened at that particular time.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy later described the shooting in great detail, telling the story as if she was there. It was, after all, a tragedy the family would process together over and over again.

FRED BALL: But in any event, that accident changed our lives entirely.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz. You're listening to season three of The Plot Thickens, a podcast from Turner Classic Movies. This season we're telling the story of how Lucille Ball became the funniest, most recognizable woman in America. This is episode Two: New York City.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It's not hard to imagine the horror Mr. and Mrs. Erickson must have felt... one day their young son is fine, the next he's paralyzed and fighting for his life. Lucy's cousin Cleo was the same age as Warner - they had been friends.

CLEO SMITH: Mrs. Erickson, would wheel him up and down in front of our house, up and down in front of our house.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Ericksons needed someone to blame. And they found him in Lucy's grandfather. They sued Fred Hunt for negligence. It was an accident, but he was the adult watching over target practice that day. Grandpa Hunt went on trial a year later in the city of Mayville, about 40 minutes from Jamestown.

MICHELLE HENRY: So, this is the original lobby. The front entrance of the courthouse that was built in 1908.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Michelle Henry works in the Mayville courthouse. She's the county historian.

MICHELLE HENRY: There's tiny little marble tiles, so you can imagine women clicking around in heels. You know it would have been noisy.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: There's a dome on the courthouse, which floods the lobby with light. And a circular staircase that leads to the courtroom.

MICHELLE HENRY: Yeah, it's very ornate. I mean, it was really meant to be impressive. This was probably one of the most important rooms in the county for official county business.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The trial was intimidating for Lucy. She remembers sitting in the courtroom, sick to her stomach. She took the stand in Grandpa Hunt's defense. So did her mother DeDe, her brother Fred and cousin Cleo. They told the jury what happened. The Ericksons were there too, with Warner in his wheelchair. The trial lasted two days.

MICHELLE HENRY: You know, probably the nature of the case, they knew they were probably not going to fare well. I mean, I would think that he probably knew he was going to be held responsible. So, I think it would have been a forbidding feeling. A terrible accident, really.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After four and a half hours, the jury returned. Grandpa Hunt was found negligent. Lucy's brother Fred told PBS about it in 2000.

FRED BALL: And the Ericksons, of course, had a lot of medical bills and so forth, which grandpa paid. But in doing so, he had he lost the home.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The home in Celeron. Grandpa Hunt was ordered to pay the Ericksons \$5,000. It was all the money he had. Every cent he'd saved over a lifetime was gone.

MICHELLE HENRY: So I think what happened is ultimately they put the lean on the property because he didn't have any other assets to speak of. And then that led to the foreclosure action.

LUCY STUDD: What a terrible thing, really. You know, somebody that's worked hard all their life.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Lucy Studd. The woman who leads tours about Lucy in Jamestown.

LUCY STUDD: Back then, there was no Social Security. You know...No unemployment, nothing, for the breadwinner of the family, to lose their jobs back then could cause a lot of destruction for the family.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And it did cause destruction. Lucy's grandfather spent a short time in jail.

FRED BALL: But jail in those days was a different he wasn't jailed, you know, per say, but he had to go to the county seat in Mayville, and he had to stay within one mile of the jailhouse, etc. I used to go up there and stay with him on occasion.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Cleo says Grandpa Hunt was never the same.

CLEO SMITH: And he just became an old man after that. I don't think he ever worked again and then the family really began to break up.

FRED BALL: And of course, he never could repay for the loss of a kid's life, because I think about five years later, the boy died.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Dede found a small apartment in downtown Jamestown where she, her husband Ed, Lucy, and Fred could live while Grandpa lived out his year-long sentence. For the rest of their lives, Lucy and her family would refer to this moment as "the breakup." Lucy had to switch high schools. She transferred to Jamestown High, which she immediately hated. She felt powerless. So, she started to run away. And when Lucy ran, she ran to New York City.

For the next five years, Lucy went back and forth between Jamestown and New York so many times it's hard to track. New York was only six hours away. Sometimes she took the train. Sometimes her boyfriend Johnny DeVita would drive her. Just the gutsiness of this is remarkable. Lucy was still in high school. Young girls traveling and living alone in New York was not common in 1929. Her virtue would have been questioned. But Lucy didn't care. In New York she had a shot at her dream.

LUCILLE BALL: I wanted to be in vaudeville, which I've said a thousand times, and I went to New York trying to get into vaudeville, little did I know that it was dead and gone, literally gone. There was no more Vaudeville.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Audiences were no longer going to vaudeville shows, they were listening to the radio and going to the movies. And on Broadway, former Vaudeville comedians who could sing and dance became stars of big musical revues like the Ziegfeld Follies.

Lucy was still determined to be on stage. She found a cheap room in a boarding house near Columbus Circle on the upper west side. Every morning she'd head out to Nedics coffee shop and search the newspapers for auditions.

LUCILLE BALL: And I wandered around and answered a few cattle calls and they found out I couldn't walk across the stage literally. And I couldn't sing and I couldn't dance. I had no training of any kind.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She went to auditions to be a showgirl - the women behind the stars who filled the stage wearing feather headdresses and dancing in unison. The men who produced stage musicals wanted showgirls to look a certain way. Lucy didn't fit the type.

KATHLEEN BRADY: The main reason she wasn't hired was because she was so flat chested. As it happens. Flat chested girls were perceived to be not as interesting eye candy as those with cleavage.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Kathleen Brady wrote a biography of Lucille Ball. She met Lucy in 1986 when Lucy was 74. Brady was on assignment for Working Woman magazine. Lucy immediately gave her advice on her hair.

KATHLEEN BRADY: And how I could color, I guess, bleach my hair using lemon juice. And she told me, well, just sit around the pool and with the sun and be careful to get all the pulp out of the lemon juice. She was very exact about all that. And of course, I had to laugh to myself because I live in New York City, and I wasn't going to be sitting around a pool.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Brady interviewed Lucy for two hours.

KATHLEEN BRADY: She really did have more energy coming out of her than anyone I ever met, but I don't think she was totally in control of it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy continued to go to auditions. She was tall and thin. Pretty, with chestnut brown hair, sharp blue eyes, and crooked teeth. She couldn't change the fact that she didn't have the body type producers were looking for. So, Lucy focused on what she could change. She created a new persona.

KATHLEEN BRADY: She decided she did not want to repeat the experience of her drama school days where she had been mousy and afraid to talk, so she decided to be Diane Belmont from Butte, Montana.

LUCILLE BALL: I changed my name to Diane Belmont. I was driving in Long Island and I saw the Belmont racetrack and I love the name Diane.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She also changed her origin story.

LUCILLE BALL: You know, people ask where you're from. And Jamestown sounded so, blech, you know, and it was, so I made it up and I said Butte, Montana.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Remember, Lucy's parents took her to Montana when she was a baby. They lived in a small town called Anaconda. They didn't stay long so she didn't remember anything about the area.

LUCILLE BALL: So I wrote to the Chamber of Commerce and I got all the books that I could about Butte and Anaconda, and I got so that I knew more about those two towns than people that lived there. I knew the streets; I knew the stores. I knew the leading citizens; I knew where the banks were.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But Diane Belmont from Butte Montana didn't make it on Broadway any faster than Lucille Ball from Jamestown. She was still watching every penny. She resorted to making tomato soup out of ketchup and water. Her boyfriend Johnny would help by sending her money from Jamestown.

FRAN ROSELLI: As you know, back in twenty nine and thirty and thirty one. People were making ten dollars a week. And he's sending her twenty, ten, 50, sometimes five.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Fran Roselli is Johnny's nephew. He has receipts of wire transfers Johnny sent to Lucy, some are even made out to Diane Belmont.

FRAN ROSELLI: But there was a few for 50 dollars, which back then that was a lot of scoots.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Fran's right - in 1929, 50 bucks is a lot of "scoots." He read us a letter Lucy wrote to Johnny around this time. The letter was written over 90 years ago, so it's a little faded.

FRAN ROSELLI: I'm terribly, terribly broke, so please send me something once in a while. Will tell you truthfully. One dollar. Now. Will help. I hate to admit it, but it is. Forever yours, Lucille.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Eventually, Lucy caught a break. More accurately, the pride of Butte Montana Diane Belmont caught the break.

LUCILLE BALL: But finally, some girls that I met there were starving along with me were going to a call at the Ziegfeld Theater.

DICK CAVETT: A casting call?

LUCILLE BALL: Yes. For a third road show of Rio Rita, many, many years ago. And I made it. I made the call. I was chosen, one of I don't know how many I've forgotten. And I kept that job for five days. That was the longest I'd ever kept any job. That was just in rehearsal, of course. And at the end of five days, they just very, you know, culled us out like that. That's it. Goodbye.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Five days of punishing rehearsals and that was it. Lucy was cut. The producer who fired her said: "It's no use Montana, you're not meant for show business."

LUCILLE BALL: So, I was so terrified because I'd already written home and told everyone that I was a Ziegfeld girl, I didn't say I was just going on the road or something, but that sounded great in Jamestown, New York.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Back then, you didn't get paid for rehearsals, so Lucy was still broke. This was one of the last straws for young and hungry Lucille Ball. She felt hopeless. She couldn't go home and face the humiliation of having failed. That day, she walked out of the theater and sobbed right on the street.

LUCILLE BALL: So, I stopped and I turned the other way and I went toward Fifth Avenue and I remember saying, I've got to kill myself, I've got to die. I can't tell anybody at home what's happened to me. So, I tried to figure how I would do it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy is telling that story to Dick Cavett 40 years later.

LUCILLE BALL: And I walked toward Fifth Avenue and a big limousine passed, a huge limousine I hadn't seen anything that big in my life. And I thought, if you're going to get hit, get hit by a big one. In case you don't die, you know, so I tried to throw myself in front of the limousine. Instead of that, it just stopped. So I picked myself up and I went on back to my little room. That was the end of my suicide attempt.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But it wasn't the end of Lucy's troubles. That night, she went to sleep with no idea where her next meal would come from. After the break, Lucy finally lands a gig.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Biographer Kathleen Brady says there were times when Lucy was genuinely scared.

KATHLEEN BRADY: But I would say like everyone else she alternated between some fear and courage and always determination. So, she managed and she focused on what worked.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: One morning she opened the paper and this time she answered an ad to model coats. Modeling turned out to be a fit.

KATHLEEN BRADY: She was very slim, tall. She also her gift for physical comedy and for using her body probably stood her in good stead there and made her a good model.

ARCHIVE FILM: In New York City, centered around 5th avenue and 57th street, are the shops and couture establishments which most immediately direct the course of American fashion.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was in this world of New York fashion.

ARCHIVE FILM: Some top designers create for big retail stores.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That Lucy met her first self-made woman. A girl boss. Hattie Carnegie.

ARCHIVE FILM: Others maintain their own establishments like Hattie Carnegie.

RAISSA BRETANA: I love Hattie because she's kind of an unsung hero in the fashion history, but she really was a pioneer.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Raissa Bretana is a historian who teaches at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.

RAISSA BRETANA: Hattie Carnegie was actually born Henrietta Kanengeiser I believe that's how it's pronounced.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Hattie started out as a millner on New York's lower east side. As she worked her way up, she changed her last name to Carnegie.

RAISSA BRETANA: So she adopted the surname because of its association with wealth, namely with Andrew Carnegie, who was the famed philanthropist and industrialist. And so it was a bit of self-actualization.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Like Lucy, Hattie had ambition.

RAISSA BRETANA: The thing about her is she could not sew. she could not draw she could not cut a pattern. She could not construct a garment herself.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But Hattie didn't let that stop her. She had a good eye and an innate shrewdness. She studied what worked in Paris and brought those styles to New York.

RAISSA BRETANA: So as Hattie Carnegie she really began to make a name for herself, she set up shop at this very luxurious location at Twenty East Forty Ninth Street, just off Park Avenue. And Park Avenue is where the fancy ladies are. So, it makes sense that she chose this location.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Hattie was small, less than five-feet tall. The New Yorker called her a tiny dynamo. She was on her third husband when she met Lucy. Suffering fools was not part of Hattie's life plan. There's a photograph of Hattie that seems to capture her...she's wearing a mix of tweeds and silk.

RAISSA BRETANA: She has several rows of pearls around her neck, large pearl clip-on earrings and a large pearl cocktail ring. So definitely the look of wealth and elegance.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the photo, she's looking at a fashion sketch and smoking a cigarette with a very long ash on it.

RAISSA BRETANA: This is Hattie at work, this very, very calculated scrutiny that she was able to translate into a very distinctive look and a very distinctive brand.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That brand became known as the "Carnegie look."

RAISSA BRETANA: Indisputable elegance, sophistication, chic, but it was decidedly unfussy and never too extreme or trendy.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Hattie hired Lucy as a model because she resembled a blonde actress named Constance Bennett. Bennett was the highest paid actress in Hollywood at the time and she often came to Hattie's fashion shows.

RAISSA BRETANA: She was wildly successful and was contracted at RKO at the time. she was especially known for her lavish shopping habits.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Hattie hoped Constance Bennett would buy more clothes if she saw them on someone who looked like her. So, Hattie made Lucy dye her brown hair platinum blonde.

RAISSA BRETANA: So, Lucille Ball's day to day work would have consisted of private showings for the most part, individual clients would come in, they would request to see evening gowns or I'm here for a negligee, and she as an in-house model, would put on those clothes and then show them to the clients. She was her youngest and least experienced model, so Hattie really had to whip her into shape and she did so by kicking Lucille in the shins whenever she didn't bend her knees properly, or she would pinch her in the ribs to convince her to lift her chest higher. And Lucille would say that she would go home with bruised shins and swollen feet.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy had to make 30-40 outfit changes in a day. It was exhausting. But it was consistent work. And she became friends with some of the other models. They gave her dating tips - tips that had more to do with survival than romance.

LUCILLE BALL: Now what bag are you carrying? I said, why? I only had two. I said, well, I'm wearing my black and blue. I said, have you got a bigger bag? I said, why? What are we gonna do? And they said, well, for the rolls. I didn't know what they're talking about. you know, the hard rolls that they give you

at some of the supper clubs? They said, we're going to that marvelous restaurant, and you bring a bigger bag. So, I found one for, I think three dollars and you took the hard roll, and you surreptitiously did all this when your gentleman friend wasn't watching or anybody else, you sort of were talking at the same and you were scraping the inside of the roll out, but you were keeping the shell. And then you drop that and then you pick up the other one and take the bread out of the middle of that and keep on talking all the time. So now you got two shells like, you know, empty potato shells. Now, you would keep them so that no waiter would pick them up, you'd put them in your bag, and then now the meat, the potatoes and the vegetables would come, and you would order very carefully. So, it wasn't too soupy. Now as the food came, you would take a little bit of meat and you'd cut it all up and you'd eat a little bit and you'd put four bites into the bun and a little potato and the little carrots and little this, little that. And then you'd fill up the other side. Then you do this, and you'd have the wax paper and you'd have tomorrow's dinner. And I always loved doing that.

ROBERT OSBORNE: But they go to things where they were literally invited to go, a bunch of girls, you know, sit with gangsters while they were having a meal. And she knew a lot of gangsters.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Robert Osborne, he was the host of Turner Classic Movies from 1994 until his death in 2017. Lucy knew Robert when was just starting out in Hollywood - hoping to be an actor. They were friends. She told him stories about how she and her model friends would make extra money as dinner companions. PBS interviewed Robert about Lucy in 1999.

ROBERT OSBORNE: I mean, I met gangsters through she said you'd go in, it's you'd be taken in this room and there'd be a huge table empty and you'd sit every other girl would sit around. She said, the first thing you do is you reach in the plate, get a hundred-dollar bill, put it in, and then you sit and be their company.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Robert believes the companionship did not extend past dinner, if you know what I mean. And I think you do.

ROBERT OSBORNE: I don't think there was I don't think she would have told it if it was, you know, if there was anything more to that. But I mean, that money was not easy to make in those days.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Eventually, Lucy made \$35 a week at Hattie's. She even began to enjoy the city a bit. It was still prohibition - so she went to speakeasies to drink and Harlem to dance. Hattie would give her cast-off dresses to wear. But even when New York was fun, Lucy got homesick. And eventually the homesickness drove her back to Jamestown.

LUCILLE BALL: I want to tell you that is a sickness I never want to have again. I was so homesick. You can't eat, you can't sleep, you cry, you can't work. It's a terrible sickness. And I used to get it, boy. Oh, so homesick. Whether I was doing well or not. Whether I was doing well or not ill, I would just get homesick.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The stints in Jamestown didn't last long. She'd get back on the train to New York and back to Hattie's. But when Lucy was 18, another kind of sickness sent her back to Jamestown. This time nearly for good.

DICK CAVETT: Can you remember anything that seemed like the low point of your career where you thought.

LUCILLE BALL: Yes when I was ill. If you don't have your health, forget it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Lucy on the Dick Cavett show - it's 1970.

DICK CAVETT: Yeah. When was that?

LUCILLE BALL: From the time I was 17 to 20. I didn't walk. I had no I was very rundown malnutrition and I got rheumatoid arthritis from pneumonia.

DICK CAVETT: Was this, could this have had anything to do with the way you were living, the way you eating, the way you were.

LUCILLE BALL: Yes entirely, not eating, not taking care of myself, and not getting enough rest. I was working both day and night. I was making all of 50 bucks or so, wet, and cold, I didn't have the proper clothes here in New York and I got very, very ill and I didn't walk. For about two years.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: There are many mysteries to Lucy's story and this is one of them. In her memoir, Lucy says she was pushing through a rough bout of pneumonia. She was standing on the dias at Hattie's shop getting fitted for a gown. Suddenly she had a burning pain in her legs and collapsed. Hattie sent her to her personal doctor, who diagnosed Lucy with rheumatoid arthritis. The doctor sent Lucy to a public clinic that she could afford.

LUCILLE BALL: I was absolutely broke at the time. I was very lucky that I was broke, actually, because it took me to the 113th clinic. The man who ran it was Professor Schuster. And as I say, I was lucky I didn't have any money because I became a guinea pig for him. And it was successful because at the time they said they didn't know how soon I would walk. Professor said, if you will let me use this serum on you, which was some kind of horse serum, as I remember.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This radical new treatment involved Lucy getting injected with a serum made from horse urine. Sounds crazy, but I'm sure some people of my generation know what we're talking about. Horse urine is still used in some drugs today. Including in hormone replacement therapy. Turns out, you can learn a lot in a podcast about Lucille Ball.

Anyway, after seeing the doctor, Lucy spent the next few weeks in her room at the boarding house. The doctor would come by and give her the injections. She was bedridden and couldn't work. Money was running out. And of course, she was homesick. She decided to go back to Jamestown. She managed to take a train to Buffalo - the closest stop to Jamestown. Johnny picked her up and drove her to the family apartment.

KATHLEEN BRADY: Well, first of all, I'm sure she was malnourished in New York City. I mean, you get only so far on tomato soup made out of ketchup and all of that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Biographer Kathleen Brady.

KATHLEEN BRADY: And she was very skinny, I mean, there's a reason why she was so slim, she didn't eat enough and she was a physical person.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Once she was back home, Lucy says she was an invalid.

LUCILLE BALL: And I was in bed for a year and a half and my mother said she used to hear me in this in the house. My bedroom was over theirs, it was downstairs, and she'd hear me fall during the night. I'd get up and I'd try to walk.

KATHLEEN BRADY: She basically told me that she had been paralyzed for a very long time in her teenage and she was in her room, however she wasn't living in a house with an upstairs in her teenage in Jamestown, so none of this. Really adds up. Some of it is because she was just a great storyteller.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic condition that doesn't disappear, so it's unlikely that's what happened to Lucy. Over the years, rumors swirled about what was really going on.

KATHLEEN BRADY: Her story changed over and over again, I don't know what really happened, I have no idea. Her dear, dear friend Marion Van Vlack, said Lucy is responsible for all these crazy stories.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It could have been homesickness, it could have been exhaustion, it could have been pneumonia or rheumatic fever. Whatever it was, Lucy couldn't beat it. She had to rest. By June of 1930, around six months later, Lucy was feeling better. The only evidence something had gone wrong was her shoes - the left shoe had a 20-pound weight in it. They were black and chunky and orthopedic. Definitely not fashionable. To distract from the shoes, Lucy began wearing blue satin pajamas on the streets of Jamestown.

Lucy stepped back into her old life. Dating Johnny. Getting into adventures with her friends. And soon, acting in a local production. A New York trained actor named Bill Bemis had a theater troupe in Jamestown called the Players Club. He was directing a local production of *Within the Law*.

WITHIN THE LAW: What's happened? Murder! Murder?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: He heard about Lucy's time in New York. He needed someone to play Aggie Lynch - a sassy gangster's moll.

WITHIN THE LAW: Remember what I told you about simple clothes? Maybe. But not for my racket, the more flash, the more cash.

LUCY STUDD: Bill Bemis went to talk to her about being in the play. He sees her in satin blue pajamas and long red fingernail polish, which wasn't the thing of the era.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Lucy Studd again, who does the Lucy tours in Jamestown.

LUCY STUDD: And he said, that's her. You know, that's Aggie. And so, he asks her to do the part.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was interesting casting given that many in Jamestown knew Lucy was Johnny DeVita's girlfriend. Johnny was a small-time hood, booze and gambling, bookmaking. But it was the right choice. Even though it was a supporting role, Lucy stole the show.

LUCY STUDD: Her performance was so outstanding that an encore was requested at the Chautauqua Institution.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Chautauqua Institute was about 20 miles from Jamestown and drew visitors from all around New York and Pennsylvania.

LUCY STUDD: So in those days, to have a request to Chautauqua Institution or any time is very prestigious.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The night *Within the Law* opened at Chautauqua, Lucy looked out at an audience of close to a thousand. The Chautauqua Daily wrote: Miss Ball gave one of the most impressive portrayals... she lived the part of the underworld girl with as much realism as if it were her regular existence."

LUCY STUDD: Lucy was thrilled. Bill Bemis told her that she was an actual professional. She considered it her first job.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That shy girl from the New York drama school? Gone. In Jamestown, she was a confident performer who knew how to get a laugh. Lucy fell in love with the stage all over again.

Lucy moved into her own apartment in Jamestown, likely paid for by Johnny. They were inseparable. And they fought... a lot. Sometimes in public. But they were in love. Johnny's nephew Fran is certain of that. But he also admits Johnny wasn't the most committed boyfriend.

FRAN ROSELLI: Johnny also had a lot of ladies that were hanging around him. And I don't know if he was afraid to get tied down. I mean, even in some of the letters. She didn't get the feeling all the time that he was really on board with everything.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Johnny's "enterprises," let's call them, began to add drama to their lives. In September of 1930, Johnny was arrested for possessing and transporting bootleg whiskey. Authorities found 195 gallons of alcohol in the family garage. In the months that followed, Johnny was arrested many times. For disorderly conduct while guarding a gambling hall. In May of 1931, he was convicted of third-degree assault for punching a guy who ran into his car. I mean, it was a brand-new Buick Coupe. During this time, Johnny's father Louis was killed. According to newspaper reports, Louis was shot in the street after fighting with another man in Italian.

FRAN ROSELLI: About a block and a half from the house he was shot. And I think the police know who did it. But at that time, if you were Italian and it didn't matter. It was, you know. There's just another Italian you know.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Johnny was the heir apparent. So Louis' businesses, legal and illegal, were now his to run. Lucy may have glimpsed her future if she stayed with Johnny. Something made her realize it was time to go... again.

So, Lucille Ball headed back to New York to give it another go. Lucy returned to modeling. She moved into her own apartment on east 53rd street. It was tiny, above an Italian restaurant. The entire place smelled like garlic. She would entertain her fellow models, describing how she would stomp up the stairs, scaring away the rats.

I like to imagine Lucy telling this story, almost rehearsing a Lucy Ricardo bit. The stomping of the feet. The widening of the eyes at the sight of a rat. The elasticity of the face and her whole body in service of the story. All clues to the comedienne she would become. Soon, Dede, Freddy, and Lucy's grandfather all joined her in New York. Dede had separated from Ed Peterson by then. Fred went to high school in New York and Dede got a job. The move was a harder transition for Grandpa Hunt, who was used to a Jamestown pace of life.

LUCY STUDD: And of course, grandpa was out of his element. You know, everything. New York City with cement. Everything here is country. You know, it's its trees. It's bushes. It's green grass. And New York City was a very distant type of place for them. And I don't mean in distance, in mileage, but people were cold, and they were not, you know, as well as friendly as someone would be in the area here.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: New York was also in many ways the epicenter of the Great Depression. New Yorkers waited in lines to get day old bread to feed their families. Makeshift huts popped up in alleyways as the city's homeless population skyrocketed.

Grandpa Hunt was too old to work. He would spend his days wandering through the city's slums, taking in all of the poverty. He had been a socialist for years. What Grandpa Hunt saw in New York only made him more passionate about what the country should do for the poor and working man. Lucy was still modeling. And she made extra money by posing for illustrators whose drawings became popular advertisements around town. One of those drawings changed Lucy's life.

KATHLEEN BRADY: She did pose in a blue chiffon dress and matching picture hat with two Russian wolfhounds.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy always looked good in blue and her blonde hair was bobbed in the style of the time. Russian wolfhounds were on either side of her. They're regal-looking dogs, tall and slim with long noses and long legs. It was quite an image. The ad men for Chesterfield cigarettes thought so. They took one look at it and thought - this will sell cigarettes. Lucy became the Chesterfield cigarette girl. In no time, her face was everywhere.

KATHLEEN BRADY: So wherever advertisements were seen, there was Lucille Ball.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On the side of buildings, on billboards high above the streets. The women featured in these ads were called poster girls.

KATHLEEN BRADY: One very hot July day in New York, Lucy was off to go shopping and she ran into an agent.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That agent called out to Lucy as she walked down the sidewalk.

SYLVIA HAHLO ACTRESS: "Lucille Ball! How would you like to go to Hollywood?"

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was Sylvia Hahlo, a theatrical agent on the lookout for models to send west to the movies.

SYLVIA HAHLO ACTRESS: "You're the latest Chesterfield girl aren't you?" "Well Sam Goldwyn needs a dozen poster girls for a new Eddie Cantor movie called Roman Scandals. One dropped out - they're leaving in three days... whaddya say?"

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Sam Goldwyn was a producer in Hollywood. In the 1930s, he was making movie versions of those elaborate Ziegfeld musicals. He needed showgirls. In New York they were Ziegfeld girls. In Hollywood, they were Goldwyn girls.

KATHLEEN BRADY: They were beautiful girls under contract, they were to be something of a musical stock company of dancers and models. Lucy would call them atmospheric background.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy said yes immediately and signed a contract. She couldn't turn the money down. Four days later, Lucy - all of 21 years old - boarded a train in Grand Central Station with a group of excited poster girls all heading to Hollywood. Her cousin Cleo was living in Buffalo at the time.

CLEO SMITH: One day I picked up the Buffalo News and going through it, I saw a picture of maybe six, maybe eight young ladies sitting on a trunk with their legs crossed and they were on their way to Hollywood and I looked and Lucille was one of them and then I couldn't believe it and I looked down the names, sure enough, Lucille Ball. These were the Goldwyn Girls, Samuel S. Goldwyn, and they were to go to Hollywood to make Roman Scandals with Eddie Cantor. And I couldn't believe it.

KATHLEEN BRADY: She was a young person who wanted a wider world and a wider life... And so she was typical of so many people who come to the big city, some of whom make it and some of whom don't. But she made it and she made it big.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: All those trips, Jamestown to New York to Jamestown to New York again. The half-eaten donuts and ketchup soup. The hunger. The hours on her feet modeling clothes for women who never bothered to learn her name. The failed auditions and the cheap apartments. After all of that, one sweltering summer afternoon, Lucille Ball finally met lady luck on a New York sidewalk.

On the next episode of The Plot Thickens, Lucy arrives in Hollywood and gives it all she's got.

JUDITH MAYNE: I grew up with I Love Lucy and so seeing her as a Hollywood actress is, you know, she was so sexy. I mean, she really had a sexual presence in those films.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Angela Carone is our Director of Podcasts. Story editor and creative consultant is Joanne Faryon. Audio editing and sound design by Mike Voulgaris and his exceptional ears. Scriptwriting by Angela Carone, Yacov Freedman, Dale Maharidge, Maya Kroth and Joanne Faryon. Yacov Freedman is our senior producer. Associate production from Josh Lash. Additional editing and sound design by Paul Robert Moundsey and Heather Frankel. Additional script editing by Bryant Urstadt and Susan White. James Sheridan is our researcher, fact-checker and resident Lucy expert. Mixing by Glenn Matullo and Tim Pelletier. Production support from Jordan Boge, Bailey Tyler, Alison Fior, Julie Bitton, Mario Rials, Susana Zapeda, Liz Winter and Reid Hall. Web support by Betsy Gooch. Thanks to David Byrne, Taryn Jacobs, Diana Bosch and the entire TCM Marketing team.

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TCM's general manager is Pola Chagnon. Our executive producer is Charlie Tabesh.

Check out our website at tcm.com/theplotthickens. It has info about each episode and photos from throughout Lucille Ball's life. Again, that's tcm.com/theplotthickens.

I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz, thanks for listening. See you next time.