

PROLOGUE

For as long as time has been recorded, Man has bought and sold Woman like the piece of property she was. And yet any woman who would dare sell her own property – her body – would be labeled a whore, a disgusting outcast with no morality and no right to exist. Even today, Woman is expected to give herself away for free and simply trust that Man will be decent. But Man is not decent.

HER PAIN WAS MULTIPLIED

January 26, 1926.

Lucille bit down on the towel between her teeth as the searing pain pierced her body. She couldn't breathe or sit or stand, so she stayed on her knees, leaning over the bed in the bare one-room apartment near Houston's vice district. She was certain she would die. The pain subsided after another thirty seconds, leaving her shaking and fearful of what would come next. Sweat dripped down her face even as she watched her breath condense in the cold air. Frozen sweat caked the tips of her hair into several taunting locks. The neighbors banged on the wall once more when she, yet again, turned the radio up to disguise the sounds of her groans and cries.

She took in the stench of the nearby oil refineries that spewed Houston's money and filth and braced for another wave of pain and terror. She would not be disappointed. The pain came again, and with it, a huge rush of water was expelled

between her legs. It sounded like a horse pissing all over the floor.

After just a few seconds of rest, she readied herself for the next pain, but this time it was not what she had been experiencing the last six hours. Instead of actual pain, she felt a sense of relief and an urge to push, as if she was having a giant bowel movement (she would later discover that a little shit had indeed escaped). A few more minutes of pushing while kneeling, and she felt the baby slide out of her, landing on the towels and relieving her stomach of all the pressure and contents she had carried the last nine months.

Moments before, she had felt on the verge of death, but now, a rush of hormones and energy lifted her, giving her the strength to cut and tie the umbilical cord – half of it still hung down to her knees. She had set aside a kitchen knife for this purpose but found herself unprepared for the toughness of the cord itself. It had the consistency of an oxtail, so she was forced to slice back and forth with the blunt knife, pitifully mangling the cord while the baby, still wet, shivered uncontrollably, too cold even to cry.

Lucille paused in a moment of reflection and watched the baby convulse. She thought it was turning blue, so she instinctively took the baby up in her arms and held it against her body as she wrapped it. It was a girl, but Lucille had no

time for reflecting further; she had to prepare for a few more pushes to expel the placenta.

In a daze, Lucille cleaned herself. She used old towels and rags and her husband's forgotten clothing to wipe the blood and embryonic fluid from her legs and feet, then rolled the pile of bloody towels and placenta together. She tied them up and readied them for the garbage. She stuffed rags between her legs to stem the blood flowing from her body that, quite literally, was nearly torn in half.

She was beginning to ache and weary now, so she prepared for sleep by wrapping five stones from the dead fire and placing them around her place in the bed. When the last stone was placed, she was once again confronted by the little girl, who was now warm but beginning to stir. Lucille realized the baby was hungry and figured she might as well do something to keep it quiet, so she pulled the baby toward her to offer her breast. Lucille was shocked to learn what power and urgent seeking of a mother's life-saving nourishment such a tiny creature could have. Why this little girl would want to live in this unforgiving hell was beyond her, but the child's message was made clear through her grip on Lucille's breast: she wanted to live.

The pain in her breast and nether regions was debilitating, but the loneliness and fear in her heart were the breaking

points. Lucille's hot tears fell as the baby suckled, and the flies appeared out of the wood flooring and walls in search of the rich nourishment the wrapped placenta could provide. She was too tired to swat a fly that had wandered to her bed; instead, she watched it extend its intestine behind for a few moments before depositing a tiny speck of fly shit onto her baby. But the fly wouldn't stay long. It had to return to the warmth of the neighbors' rooms within minutes, or it would freeze in Lucille's unheated room. She dozed off as she watched the light snow fall outside her window. It was only the fourth time in Lucille's sixteen years of life that she had seen snow. Almost an inch this time.

Rosemary. The baby's name was Rosemary.

A few hours later, Lucille awoke with a start. It was now dark out, and the snow had already melted. The baby was whimpering, and Lucille panicked as the reality of her new life set in. How was she supposed to provide for this little creature? Did she even want to provide for the girl? She could smother it right now.

She brought her hand to the baby's mouth, ready to act, but the baby reflexively attempted to suckle her finger, and this gave Lucille pause. The tears returned once more as she realized she couldn't do this.

But she was still a child, really, and alone in a city of almost 300,000 people. Her husband had disappeared six months ago without a word, leaving her to fend for herself in a world that offered little opportunity for a woman to earn her bread. Her heart wearied at the thought of how she had made it through the last six months.

When Henry had first disappeared, Lucille had immediately thought of running to her parents. But her departure from her childhood home had been on bad terms. Her parents had refused to approve of her marriage to Henry because they weren't sure he would treat her right. But she had confidently left them with her hand in Henry's, insisting she and her new husband could do better than the meager life her parents had offered.

So, instead of turning to the only family she had, she had cut off all ties to her previous life to assume her missing husband's identity. This had enabled Lucille to earn ten dollars a week as an overweight store clerk right up until last week, when she'd feigned heart conditions and quit. Since Henry disappeared, she had fantasized that she would take a pillow to the child's face after it was born so she could continue with her life, but now she was unsure. On the other hand, nobody would hire a mother. They would tell her to stay home and let the man of the house take care of her. Lucille had learned the hard way that a forsaken wife must face her betrayal alone.

FORBIDDEN WOMAN

Through her time spent posing as a man, Lucille had become accustomed to the freedom that came with being a man. “Henry” could walk down the center of the sidewalk and look others straight in the eye, as if to say, “I’m here, what are ya gonna do about it?” instead of moving to the side and not taking up space. “Henry” could come and go as he pleased. “Henry” could keep the money he earned, instead of handing it to a spouse or guardian. “Henry” could borrow money and buy land. He could even join the boys down at the speakeasy for any drink he liked, Prohibition or not, and he didn’t need anyone’s permission. He could sit and ogle the pretty girls and talk about his conquests as much as he liked.

What’s more, “Henry” could buy the company of women, and it was this fact that now occupied Lucille’s thoughts. A particularly pretty call girl operating at the fringe of Houston’s vice district could earn twelve dollars in a single night, which was more than any woman and most men could earn in a week “honestly.” But as far as Lucille could tell, the salesclerk who told her unsightly customer she was just gorgeous in the new dress was corrupt, while the call girl who provided a personal and necessary service was the honorable one.

Today, Lucille estimated she was particularly pretty, even after childbirth. Could she do this? It seemed to her that her choice was between continuing to pose as a man to avoid being fired for mothering and offering a particular service to men

who were willing to pay for her time. The former was fraud and would bring nothing but a lifetime of toil and near poverty. The latter had been illegal for a few years now, but it was honest, and if she played her cards right, it would get her out of hell.

Lucille pulled herself out of bed to commence turning plans into action less than twenty-four hours after her daughter was born. Her green eyes, in response to the drive behind her beating heart, now assumed a coldness that would chill most any soul.