

If the Senator from New York would do something about her mousey brown hair she could be a real looker, decided the Senator from Rhode Island. She was getting near the Paul Revere section of her speech, and the crowd would be applauding back home in Boise and Baton Rouge in a few hours. It was not for nothing that she was called the Queen of Television. He watched her at the podium; her presence almost made the large backdrop painting of President McCarthy vanish.

"...do not know the name of the little town my ancestor founded. It was Charleston, Massachusetts. But it was from that little town that Paul Revere made his ride. One if by land, two if by sea. Well we know they are coming by sea and we know that some of them are already here, fifth columnists in wait. Some have been easy to spot in the last decade. Some were even proud of their anti-American political views. We have chased them from film. We have chased them from television. We have chased them from the public schools. But the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. It has been questioned in this body if we are right to use their labor to further that vigilance. It has been asked if the Communist should be working in our defense plants especially now as missiles build up in Cuba. I say yes. I say that we should turn the forces of Communism against itself at all odds.

"Now there are those who have hinted that we do not treat our enemies within kindly. This is balderdash. We treat them a million times more kindly than freedom fighters are treated at the gulags in the Soviet Union. But I am not a woman of rhetoric. I am not a lady of speech giving. I will go to our largest facility, the plutonium bomb factory called Pantex in Amarillo, Texas this week. I am going with the Senate cameras rolling for the USABC, and I will show the world how well we treat those who would destroy us with their lies.

"I will maintain constant vigilance. As many of you know I am related to George Washington; two of my relatives have served as governors of Rhode Island. My family has long served this country and I will serve it as long as draw breathe."

The speech over and the strong lights were extinguished. There was mild applause. She didn't seem that great a performer live as she did televised. That was probably why she was unmarried. That and the hair.

Senator Ball's aide helped her remove her make up back in the senator's office.

"Senator, you were wonderful," said Scarlet Vance. "The Senate still has higher ratings than the three commercial networks and that's due to you."

"Thank you Scarlet, but I know that's not true. You know I took drama. Did you know Bette Davis was in my class? Bette Davis. I'll never forget the day the director of the school told me to choose another profession, any other profession."

"Is that why you went into politics Ma'm?"

"No that was because of my family. I looked at the state of women in politics. There wasn't any. I knew I had a shot at it. I figured I had to be the first."

"You're a visionary."

"No but I am brave."

"Are you looking forward to the trip to Texas?"

"No. I am not looking forward to being in a bomb plant with a bunch of Communists. That would be low on my list of travel plans, but rumors abound that we are mistreating people and I need to stop that. There are responsibilities that come from being the Queen of Television. Did you find anything interesting to do out there?"

"Yes M'am. Two years ago a new restaurant opened on Route 66 called the Big Texan Steak House. They offer you a free 72 ounce steak dinner if you eat it in an hour."

"A 72 ounce steak?"

"Well you have to eat the trimmings too. Shrimp cocktail, baked potato, salad and bread. "

"And you think I could do this?"

"Oh no, M'am. I think you would enjoy watching a cowboy from one of the local ranches try. I talked with one of the political officers in the region and he said it was quite amusing."

"You know me so well."

"There's a link to your trip you know. When the prisoner of war village from World War II was taken down at Pantex, it was used to build the Big Texan."

"Well that's just plain homey."

"M'am, you are really in favor of the Communists being used to build bombs, aren't you?"

"Of course I am, Scarlett. Of course I am."

Senator Ball had not liked the exotic appetizers. Jess Oppenheimer had taken the Senator to the Big Texan. Everyone likes the Big Texan. He got her what he always got the men: rattlesnakes and bull testicles. He had not explained to the lady from New York that "calf fries" were bull testicles. He thought everybody knew that. He sensed somehow that he was losing her.

"It's a huge facility," he was saying, "sixteen thousand acres."

"Could I see Palo Duro Canyon while I'm here?"

"Well of course. It's a lovely spot I take the wife and kids there every summer."

"I am interested in a painter that learned her style there. Georgia O'Keefe. Ever heard of her?"

"She was declared a Sympathizer last year."

Then there was awkward silence again as the Senator watched grease congeal on her bull's testicle.

Outside the restaurant she looked at the Big Texan. A huge sign of a lanky legged cowboy. She knew she was looking at something eternal, something that would always be a symbol of America like a Burma Shave sign or the Statue of Liberty. None of her speeches, none of the fine words in the Senate had as much power as this. This was why she had never married. She had never found a man as beautiful as the Big Texan.

It was a strange year. In January, Pope John XXIII had excommunicated Fidel Castro. In May, the Israelis had hung Eichmann. Last month AT&T launched the first commercial satellite ever. President McCarthy had explained how each of these events showed that Communism was on the run. The Pope had excommunicated the Communist closest to our shores so God was on our side. The Israelis were cleaning up the last traces of WWII so we didn't have to worry about history any more. AT&T had showed that Capitalism would take over space.

But she didn't know sometimes. Maybe all these things would happen anyway. Maybe there is too much spin on history. Perhaps we are becoming a little like the folk in Khrushchev's lands.

The Amarillo night air was warm and dry and was giving her strange thoughts. Almost all of the Free World's helium comes from Amarillo; maybe that's why she was thinking oddly.

Or maybe it was the Big Texan staring down at her.

Amarillo is known for its invention of barbed wire and Mother-In-Laws' Day.

She went to the hotel.

The barracks smelled bad.

There were separate quarters for men and women, and one of the first things that the Senator discovered were that families had been split up. She had come here to prove that that rumor was unfounded. She knew that she would have to fib. She knew that even before she came; fibbing is part of politics. But she was unhappy.

"It is important, " she told Karl, "That we do not film the barracks. This does not look like America. We will film inside the plant."

"Happy workers making bombs?" asked Karl.

"Karl I know this isn't your life work. It isn't Dracula or Metropolis but it keeps you busy."

"You're wrong. This is Metropolis."

Senator Ball was about to say something, some nice reminder to Karl that since he came from Czechoslovakia people were always looking him as a Sympathizer, when she saw him.

The Big Texan.

All right maybe it was not love at first sight, maybe it took five minutes.

He was swarthy and short. He had dark hair and eyes. He stood in the door of one of the barracks. He wore the same yellow jumpsuit that everyone else did. He was waiting for the whistle, for his shift to start. Then it hooted and he headed off toward one of the buildings. She followed along.

"Sir?" she said.

He did not stop.

"You. You with the dark hair."

He stopped. Unlike most of the workers he did not turn his eyes to the ground. "Si?" he said.

"You're one of the Cubans aren't you?"

"Si."

"What's your name?"

"Desiderio Alberto Arnaz y de Acha the Third."

"That's quite a name."

"I have to go now lady. I don't want to get into trouble."

"It's out of the question," said Mr. Oppenheimer.

His office was large and clean. It radiated a good American vibe.

"I think it would be a great idea," said Senator Ball. "I interview this man, this worker on camera and we can show how things here really are not so bad."

"He's not going to say that."

"That's the miracle of film. We edit what he says and make him look like he is saying all positive things. We can make him look like he has deeply reconsidered his stance on Communism and is ready to rejoin America."

"You don't understand, Senator Ball. We don't know that this man ever was a Communist. All Cuban nationals just wound up here."

"That's what makes this a great idea. We can show that our camps have great conditions and that they reform inmates. We show that our system works."

"Then what happens?"

"We let him go. Not unsupervised of course. I could take him back to New York with me. He could reestablish himself in whatever he did before he came here."

"You want to play mother to a Sympathizer."

"But he isn't a Sympathizer. We would be showing our humane side. It would be a great response to people in Europe that are saying we keep political prisoners. I know politics. I know how people think, that's why they sent me here."

"I'll have to call my superiors in Washington of course."

"Of course, " said the Senator. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

These were the conditions. It was going to be on Patriots' Day August 6, which was Senator Ball's birthday, as well as the anniversary of the Enola Gay dropping the bomb on Hiroshima. Mr. Arnaz Arnaz y de Acha III would be wearing a suit. There would be a large photo of President McCarthy in the background. Something tasteful from his third term. The interview would focus on good things -- the chow, the access to TV, the rec room. It would be pointed out that Mr. Arnaz Arnaz y de Acha III not only still had relatives living in Cuba but that his father had actually returned there.

The Pantex management would view it before it aired.

There were five minutes of pleasantries.

Yes the prisoners had cigarettes, TV, pool and chicken fried steak on Fridays. They could grow their own vegetable gardens. They could read the newspaper, get books from the bookmobile, and they were loaded onto the bus to visit the Diary Queen once a month.

It was far, far better than anything they would have got in a Communist country.

Then there was the part that was not aired.

"But you don't understand, Senator, you and I are the same. We just want something better for people like us."

"What do you mean, Mr. Arnaz?"

"We both come from political families. My father was the mayor of Santiago. When the Batista revolution happened in thirty-three, we lost everything. We came here seeking a new life."

"But your father went back to Cuba."

"That was before the problems now. I am an American."

"You were organizing Cubans."

"Yes. To vote. To become citizens. Then one night there is the knock at the door. 'Desi you have some things to explain.' I can't explain my family. I can't explain history. I can explain myself. I am not the evil at the heart of Cuba."

Then it happened and the dam broke. It had been in place for over twelve years, ever since Senator McCarthy's Lincoln Day speech where he revealed he knew of the fifty-seven Communists in the State Department. Congresswoman Ball had heard the echoes of the words, and knew someday they would find out. Someday she would be hung as a witch just like those women from Salem. Somehow her wyrd had been laid down when Charleston had been founded. Somehow it was time for her to hang. She looked at the most beautiful man in the world and said it.

"I can't explain my family either Senor Arnaz. My grandfather was a Communist. He asked me to register once in the Communist party. I did it as a favor to him."

The camera stopped rolling. The lights were shut off. Jess Oppenheimer cleared his throat.

They didn't even let her leave Pantex that night. They put her in a little room with a cot. A bare light bulb hung down and Jess Oppenheimer stood over her. She lay in the same dress as the interview, her makeup not washed off except where her tears had done the job.

"Why did you tell them, Senator?" asked Jess, "If nobody had found out by now, they would have found out. It wasn't your mistake. It was your grandfather's."

"My Grandfather thought it was helping the working man. He didn't know about Stalin and the camps, and look at us, we have camps now."

"You didn't have to say anything. You aren't helping Mr. Arnaz. He was a lost cause the moment he began to complain. You can't help people like him."

"No, I have helped. I will be able to speak until they silence me. I am still the Queen of Television."

"I got a wire. I am not to let you leave. Ever."

"So I disappear here, a little loudmouth among the bog bombs?"

"Yes. I am not supposed to tell you, but I shared a steak with you."

"Will I be kept here for a long time?"

"No. There will be an accident tomorrow."

"Do I get any last requests?"

"Sure, what do you want?"

"One 72 ounce steak dinner and Mr. Arnaz to help me eat it."

He shook his head "no" but headed out of the room. She had given up hope of seeing the man she had so inconveniently fallen in love with, when they called her.

It was nearly midnight. They had put a little table with a clean white tablecloth and nice china and silver on it next to an assembly line. Someone had poured red wine and lit candles. It was Amarillo, Texas so they had iced tea in addition to their wine.

He still wore the suit they had given him for the filming. She had washed her face.

"It's very lovely," said Mr. Arnaz. "Thank you, Senator."

"You can call me Lucy."

The assembly line began to hum. Desi smiled.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked.

"No," she said. "They tell me much about the workings of the plant."

"Plutonium enriched parts come by. You don't work in this part of the plant unless you are wearing a heavy lead lined floor length coat. Even then you visit only for brief inspections and they slow down the line as you walk through. But sometimes there are 'accidents.'"

"People trapped in the room getting too much radiation."

"Exactly."

"They run over to those doors that are securely locked."

"They yell a great deal and then they die."

"Let's not do that."

"I agree. So Lucy you've got some 'splain'n to do. Why are you here?"

The parts had begun moving down the line, each sending out an unseen death. They ate with their shrimp, sliced it with their four and half pounds of steak, smashed it into their potatoes, and enjoyed it with their salads. As the machinery grew louder they had a hard time hearing each other, but greater and greater comfort in speaking. They told each other their dreams and secret wishes, stories from their families, and even sang songs. It was as though in a very few hours they lived out an entire married life. They did not waste time on regrets or politics - they knew the unseen clock was ticking, beaming a thousand thousand X-rays of them into space.

He poured wine, and she wished she could have added a trip to the beauty parlor as part of the last meal. She had always wanted to be a blonde or maybe a redhead.