Looking for Trouble

A Short Story from an Idea by Erin

By Maryanne Peters

Ryan Tolliver rode out of the south, looking for Trouble. That is how this story might begin. Not looking for trouble, but looking for Trouble with a capital T. Trouble Lumiere. Ryan might have called her his lady love. But she was no lady. Not in any sense.

You see, when she was born her mother named her Trouble because being a half-black child born in 1850 could be nothing but trouble. Not that she was really half black, because even her mother had a bit of white in her – some overseer or maybe even the master himself Old Man Tolliver. Trouble had long dark hair that was almost straight, and her skin was pale if she avoided the sun.

But she lived up to her name as a child. That is why the overseer gelded the boy. If I neglected to mention that, I apologize. She was no she. Trouble was a boy up until the age of about twelve. Being as he was pale and short on muscle his master had him working in the household from a younger age, and getting in a little book learning to do his chores. But then the boy started getting too familiar and so causing mischief with the master’s granddaughter Delia. Things had to change. Grown men were castrated for less in those days.

“That little man of yours is a man no more,” Delia was told. That poor young lady took it upon herself to help the poor thing - Trouble. She and Trouble’s mother helped to find a new role for the youth.

If you can’t be a boy then be a girl,” they said. You may understand that while the child was in shock there was not much to be said. He simply did as they bade, or should I say she. Yes, I will. She it is. A life size doll for Mistress Delia to dress as she liked, and not always play the servant, but sometimes the southern belle, as they called ladies of privilege back then.

But trouble makes trouble they say, and Trouble did. It was not long before this new young lady learned that the female life might be better after all. No field work for sure, and if housework was only pushing a broom around or peeling potatoes, then that was easy. Much would have been discovered about her misdeeds, if it were not for the War.

Who was Ryan Tolliver? He was the man looking for Trouble. That would be Delia’s older brother. He had no regard for Trouble the boy, but Trouble the girl was a person he became fascinated by. I heard the whole story direct from her mouth. Ryan’s sister introduced Trudi-Belle a white girl from in town, and Belle simpered and giggled and stole his heart away, only to have it brought right down with a crash.

But Trouble has a way, as they say. Our Trouble learned all about teasing and flirting, and what a young woman can do to a man, even when she is not really a young woman at all.

I learned more about it from St. John (he called himself “Sin Jin”) Lumiere. He was Trouble’s older brother by some years. Probably not the same father as St. John was a darker negro, but still with the fine features of his mother and “sister” he was a good-looking young man.

Lumiere was the name that St. John’s Cajun father gave to the boy, and Trouble got it too, but probably not by blood. The overseer would be the best candidate for her father, but he died fighting for the confederate cause in the last months of the war - before the spring of 1865. Ryan was a gray-back too, but survived without a scratch as many of the privileged seemed to. I should know as for the first part of that war I myself was a slave in the service of Colonel Reeves.

After I was freed for saving the Colonel’s life (and most certainly not in a fight over a card game as some say) I headed west and lived among the Indians, so by the end of the war I had the skills that were needed to work in Indian Territory as a federal law enforcement officer. And that was how I came to meet St. John Lumiere.

I might have thought that St. John could be trouble (with a small T), but it was not to be. I have been known to say the words: “We black folk owe our freedom to the law, so in return we owe the law our trust and respect.” People say I am harder on the negro than on the white man, but that is not so. Any man must face the law for his crimes, even my own son Bennie, who I tracked down and arrested one time.

St. John was quick with a gun, that is for sure, but he was never a man to draw first, and my report to Judge Isaac Parker said as much. I know how to question each man in private so as to find the lies. Being a negro myself it is easy for me to explain to witnesses that: “Being black is no crime in itself, so if it is self-defense, then no crime has been committed”.

So we shared a bottle of whiskey together instead, and he told his tale.

Like me St. John had headed west when the war was over, although later than me. And then he went back to fetch his “sister” and to bring her out to Arkansas and maybe find a life. He had plans for her to work in service as she had those skills, but Trouble was not of a mind to be in anything. They trouble will out, and Trouble did.

She took work as a hostess at the saloon in Muskogee. It gave her the chance to wear some of the fancy dresses she had brought up from the plantation in a trunk.

“I’ll not sell my body,” she told the owner, “But I will supply good spirits, half of which I expect you to stock. And if there are bodies for sale, I will make sure that the house collects its share.” She proved herself in no time.

Some say that Trouble was passing for white, but the truth is that she never made any such claim. She had the kind of dark features that she could have been one of those Spanish Ladies they sing about. She always wore her hair up and was smartly dressed. Nobody could guess that under those skirts a man’s member reclined.

Maybe cowboys assumed that St. John was her husband even though he was black, and she appeared maybe not to be. They shared a name of anybody might ask, and he was protective of her. His protection was of value. As I say, the young man was fast, and he knew it.

Many folks back down south might say good riddance to trouble and to Trouble, but not all. The fact is that when Ryan Tolliver came home from the war and sought out Trouble, he was told she was gone. There were still freed folk ready to work the estate, but that is not what Ryan wanted. He wanted her.

A man at war thinks of many things to keep his head straight. Some men think of their wives or lady friends, other of their mothers or even the family dog. Ryan thought only of Trouble. It is my assessment that these thoughts became what is called an obsession. That is a thing that can drive a man to madness.

Now Ryan knew that this woman was not a true woman, but he did not care at the outset and by the end of the war it seemed no obstruction at all. I am not to judge the man. Some men prefer the company of other men, although I have to say it, Trouble was not a man to anybody. In Arkansas she had gained some notoriety as a beauty and a tease.

She appeared more of a woman than could be possible when I learned of her condition. St. John told me that he had found and visited upon his father, who was as a said a Cajun from South Louisiana. In those parts this man ran an apothecary shop, and he was able to supply for the use of Trouble some voodoo remedy that allowed Trouble to become womanlier, and maybe even to bewitch men. Myself, I take no notice of such superstitions. For me that the nonsense followed by slaves – not free folk.

But there is no mistaking that whether by chemistry or corsetry Trouble had acquired the shape of woman. It might have appeared that: “Trouble, thou art Woman”, rather than the other way around.

I was working my own land at the time, before I became a fulltime federal officer, when Ryan Tolliver called upon me. He had heard that I was from Southern parts, although of the other color, and that I was well familiar with Indian Territory. He called upon me to help him to find Trouble Lumiere.

This was before I became deputy to US Marshall James F. Fagan in 1875, and when times were tough as a dirt farmer in Arkansas Territory. I had met St. John at that time and his sister once, when I thought that was what she was. But I did not let on that I knew where she was, and that I knew her secret as St. John had later shared it with me. Instead, I said it would be a difficult task and I asked for a payment up front which I gave to my wife. We set off together.

In those days the law west of the Mississippi was for the Federal Government and elected local Sheriffs, but it was sparse and variable. My best asset was that almost everybody knew Bass Reeves, the negro Indian guide, and they knew that I was a best friend than an enemy, and better even alive than dead if my skills were needed.

I knew that St. John had a job with the Santa Fe Railroad Company. He had started by hiring negro labor laying tracks through to New Mexico but was also helping to procure land and deal with “obstructions to progress”. We could expect to find him ahead of the track in Oklahoma Territory, far to the west of Muskogee, so rather than take Ryan directly towards Trouble, I led him away, for the time being.

It was the first time that I had met Ryan, but I new him the way that I knew all men like him. I made a point of addressing him by his given name, because he gave it. I did not care whether he called me Mr. Reeves or Bass, so long as it was not “Boy”. He called me first by the first of these, then by the second, and never by the last. When we would meet strangers, they would address him first, as was something I was used to.

“No sir,” he came to say. “This is Bass Reeves, the Indian scout, and he is most ably guiding me through the territory.” And I would tip my hat.

One night by the fire, he said to me: “Bass, you know that I knew no better, do you not? I was raised with slaves doing the work. We knew no other way of life, so we fought to keep it. You must understand that I have no ill will against negroes.”

I was thinking that it was a lie, because I know lies, and I know that he will always think us lesser than them, but I said: “I know that Ryan. We are just two men, made of the same stuff, out here in the world, with a common purpose.”

There was no ill will. There was never a thought about us of any kind. I bear my horse no ill will if it will not respond to the rein. It is a beast of burden, as I might have been to him and his family.

So, I was interested to see him meet one of his own beasts when we came to the forward camp of the Santa Fe Railroad Company, a team of surveyors well protected by a team of guns, including St. John Lumiere.

I saw the look on Ryan’s face when St. John thrust out his hand to shake his prior owner’s grandson. It was as if to take it was a bigger defeat than Appomattox. But he took it.

“He has come looking for Trouble,” I said. Some of the men around him bristled, and I realized how strange those words might have seemed. You just get so used to using her name – it always seemed right.

“Trouble is in Muskogee,” said St. John. The boys around him looked confused. Ryan gestured that we move away to speak in private, which we did.

“I need to see her,” said Ryan.

“Her? You mean him,” said St. John. “Your dreams of the woman Trouble are just that, Mr Tolliver. Trouble is a man, despite what you family did to him.”

I know lies, but I understood why St. John would say this. It was clear that it was like a yankee sabre into his belly. It was meant to hurt and it did. While his head hung, I looked at St. John and I nodded. For the negro in this world, small victories must be treasured.

Ryan did not want to stay in their camp despite the offer of hospitality. We rode away.

“Can you guide me to Muskogee?” he said.

I replied: “It seems a ride to Trouble may be a ride to disappointment.” But we went anyway.

I learned that St. John had sent a message back to his sister: “Ryan Tolliver is looking for you. Dress as a man and destroy his dreams.” Or something of that nature anyway.

As I said, I had only met her that one time and I thought her truly female. She might well have been one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. She had those big brown eyes and full lips that men like in a black woman, but then those fine features, pale skin and that long hair that white women have, except the hair was jet black and naturally curly. I could not imagine her as a man, but thought I would fin out.

But Trouble being Trouble she got her brother’s note but ignored it. Instead she made sure that around the time we were due to ride in, she was at her finest.

As they say, I was struck by her. Just looking at her was like a slap in the face. But to look at the reaction of Ryan Tolliver made me feel rock solid, for he was clearly so weak the knees that I thought I might have to stop him from keeling right over.

“Well now, Mr. Ryan Tolliver, as I live and breathe,” she cooed, with eyelashes waving like ladies fans on a warm afternoon. “Don’t tell me you have come all this way to see little old me?”

It had been a long way. And we had spent a while looking for her, but my guess is that he wanted to do more than just look.

But I am not a man to intrude upon the private affairs of other men. I collected the balance of my fee and I allowed them some privacy.

I rode out of Muskogee, a town I would come to live in during my time as a Deputy US Marshall and later as a consulting investigator at the Muskogee Police Department.

I don’t how it was possible, but I guess what with the war and all, birth records in the South were what you could make them, but Ryan Tolliver married Trouble Lumiere. I heard tell that they are still married to this day. But the last time I saw Ryan, I remember the words he said to me:

"I love that woman, Bass, but by God she is trouble". I am assuming he meant that with a small T.

The End

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