

**EPISODE 1: JAMESTOWN**

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: There’s a story Lucille Ball told often over the years. It happened long before I Love Lucy made her famous. She was around 17 and living in a boarding house in New York. She was struggling to make it in show business. It wasn't going well, and she was broke. So, to eat Lucy came up with a trick, a kind of low-stakes con. She talked about it on Shirley McClain’s variety show.

**LUCILLE BALL**: I have to admit I was kind of ingenious. There was this breakfast place I can’t remember the name of it, but they had these big round counters. And they gave you orange juice coffee and two donuts. Most of the times someone left a nickel tip and praise god someone would leave a half a donut. And that’s the kind of person I was waiting for. As soon as he put down his nickel, I’d slide down to the stool pick up the half donut and the nickel and say may I have some more coffee please? I got away with that for months!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy told this story so often it became legend, so much so that to this day, people visit her grave in upstate New York and leave nickels on her headstone. Lucy’s years in New York were hard. She went to audition after audition and got rejected over and over again. She had to hustle just to eat. But Lucile Ball wasn’t a quitter. Not by a long shot.

She was ambitious. Back when women weren’t supposed to be. Lucy eventually made her way from New York to Hollywood where she got roles in 75 movies - a lot of small parts - but still... 75 movies! And then, when Lucille Ball turned 40, she had a second act I’m not sure anyone - man or woman - will ever beat. Together with her real-life husband Desi Arnaz, she would create and star in one of the greatest television sitcoms in history.

The I Love Lucy Show was watched by nearly everyone who had a television back in the 1950s. And people are still watching it today. More than 40 million around the world. My eight-year-old daughter Joise is one of them…I Love Lucy made Lucille Ball rich and famous and powerful.

**LUCILLE BALL**: It was nothing I ever expected.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Maybe Lucy didn’t expect to be so famous. She sure was determined to be a star. And she paid a price for that.

**MAURY THOMPSON**: She's suspicious of everyone, they're out to get her.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: The more successful Lucy became the higher the stakes got. I thought I knew who Lucy was, turns out I didn’t know much at all. I didn’t know how hard it was for Lucille Ball to get what she wanted - not just success and fame - but the things we all want - family, love, security. And I had no idea just how close she came to losing it all.

I’m your host Ben Mankiewicz. You’re listening to season three of The Plot Thickens, a podcast from Turner Classic Movies. Each season, we bring you an in-depth story about the movies and the people who make them. This season, the story of how Lucille Ball became the funniest, most recognizable woman in America.

**JOHN DAVIDSON**: That redhead found a special place in our hearts.

**LUCILLE BALL**: Call me, Lucy!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: It was the character of Lucy Ricardo that made Lucille Ball famous.

**I LOVE LUCY CLIP**: Are you tired, run-down, listless? Do you poop out at parties?

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: That’s from a famous episode of I Love Lucy - which I’ve seen so many times and it still makes me laugh. It’s Lucy’s face that delivers... It was just so expressive - and those giant blue eyes. In other episodes she flings and contorts her body. It was all part of her comedic genius.

**KATHLEEN BRADY**: She was the greatest physical comedian that ever lived and may possibly ever live.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Even Lucille Ball’s marriage became famous. Her TV husband, Ricky Ricardo, was played by her real-life husband Desi Arnaz. A musician from Cuba.

**DESI ARNAZ**: Lucy, I’m home!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Together Lucy and Desi created I Love Lucy and the modern sitcom. Desi was the genius businessman and Lucy his muse.

**TOM GILBERT**: He understood comedy, he understood finance, he understood business and he was a gambler he would take chances.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: On TV, their relationship was pretty innocent. They slept in separate beds and squabbled. Real life... that was different.

**ROBERT OSBORNE**: They had a really great sexual relationship, and they were really in love with each other. And then he starts running around with other women.

**DOTSON RADER**: He did not lead a lonely life and he wasn't around. He just wasn't around.

**JIM BROCHU**: It just took its toll and she’d had it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: That show and that marriage - that’s how a lot of people know Lucille Ball. But there’s so much more to her career. She was a serious actress. She was one of the first women to be pregnant on TV. She starred on Broadway. She became the first woman to run a major television studio. The first woman to be a star - a real star - as a comedian. Making room for women like Carol Burnett.

**CAROL BURNETT**: On her way out, she's a kid, if you ever need me for anything, don't hesitate, give me a call.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Over the next ten episodes, we’re going to share what we’ve learned about Lucy, and we’ll talk to a lot of people along the way. We’ve also scraped together every bit of tape we could find of Lucy herself - so she could tell her own story. You’ll hear Lucy in her 30s.

**LUCILLE BALL**: This is Lucille Ball, all of us agree that the Constitution of the United States must be defended.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Middle-aged Lucy…

 **LUCILLE BALL**: He said get your own life in order and everything else will fall in place.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: And a much older Lucy - a voice a little hardened by life... and a steady diet of chesterfield cigarettes.

**LUCILLE BALL**: Television was so immediate. It was like this. It was like this was like all of a sudden, wow.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucille Ball’s rise to fame - it’s really the most improbable of stories. More than just small-town girl makes it big. More like small town girl becomes cultural icon. We start off in a hometown. You know, the places we all love and can’t wait to get away from. For Lucy, that place was in upstate New York. This is Episode one: Jamestown.

**LUCILLE BALL**: So, you're going to find water, there's Kleenex and hand wipes the back there.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: For 20 years, Lucy Studd has given tours of Jamestown to visitors who want to see where Lucille Ball grew up. She even provides snacks.

**LUCY STUDD**: And this candy goes to you two. I love chocolate.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Studd is 71. But she has the energy of someone half her age.

**LUCY STUDD**: Straight ahead, I like to point out to you the overpass.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: She’s wearing a silk scarf with the faces of Lucy and Desi in a giant heart.

**LUCY STUDD**: It says New York and Chicago. That's because we're the halfway point between New York and Chicago.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Jamestown is small, around 30,000 people. It’s a tourist spot because it sits on one of the prettiest lakes in the area, Lake Chautauqua. It used to be one of the largest furniture manufacturing hubs in the US. Lucy’s grandfather, Fred Hunt, worked in the furniture factories.

**LUCY STUDD**: To my right, this is the house that Lucille Ball was born in.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy Studd points to a two-story house with beat up siding and chipped brown paint. The front hedges are a bit of a mess. An American flag hangs out front. It’s where Lucille Ball’s mother and grandparents lived more than a century ago. They rented an apartment on the second floor. Lucy’s mother was Desiree Hunt, everyone called her Dede.

**LUCY STUDD**: Lucy described her as having, like, porcelain, white skin. Her mother, Dede, had married a young man, a handsome man named Henry Darrell Ball in 1910.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Henry Ball was 22, tall and thin, with THE big blue eyes Lucy would inherit. Dede was 17 when she married Henry. Less than a year after their wedding, Dede and Henry had a baby. And Dede gave birth in this house.

**LUCY STUDD**: And Lucy was born in the second story back of the house. They say the bedrooms were located there.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy’s grandmother delivered her at 5 o’clock in the afternoon on August 6, 1911.

**LUCY STUDD**: Her grandmother was a midwife. One of the most famous midwives in the area. Her name was Flora Belle Orkat Hunt. She was one of five sets of twins. I know, which blows my mind. I don’t know what I'd do if I had five sets of twins.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Let’s be clear, nobody knows what they would do if they had five sets of twins. Dede, Henry, and baby Lucy stayed in Jamestown for about a year before moving to Montana where Henry found work as an electrical lineman. Lucy adored her father.

**LUCY STUDD**: She talks about when she was a little girl, and her dad would toss her in the air and catch her. And she said that gave her a feeling of confidence because she knew he would be there to catch her.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: In 1914, they moved to a suburb of Detroit so Henry could work at the Michigan State Telephone Company. It was their Henry got sick.

**LUCY STUDD**: Unfortunately, Henry came down with the gripe. We know it as typhoid fever.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: After four weeks, typhoid fever got the better of Henry Ball. He died when he was only 27. Lucy was 3 and a half at the time. Decades later, she told interviewer David Frost about the day her father died.

**LUCILLE BALL**: Well, I remembered that I was standing by a window, and I wanted to go out and my mother was kind of hysterical and crying and I was annoying her and a few minutes later, I guess a picture fell off the wall and a bird flew in the window, that I remember.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: For the rest of her life, Lucille Ball would be superstitious about birds. Lucy’s mother Dede was 22 years old. A widow and 5 months pregnant.

**DEDE**: He died when Lucille was 3 1/2 years old and I had another baby coming, which was my son.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: That’s Dede - at age 79 on Merv Griffin’s talk show.

**DEDE**: I didn't treat it as tough, it’s just life. And I had a home to go to, which I was very grateful for that helped.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Dede and Lucy moved back in with her parents in Jamestown. Lucy’s little brother was born four months later. DeDe named him Freddy - after her father, Fred Hunt. Lucy was jealous of her new baby brother and all the attention he got. She missed her father. And her mother was unable to comfort her. Lucy Studd thinks Dede was battling post-partum depression.

**LUCY STUDD**: You know, we didn't know it back then. But, boy, I'll tell you, I don't know how you could go through that without having something similar to that.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Dede’s parents thought some sunshine might help, so Grandpa Hunt scraped together enough money for a train ticket to California and off Dede went.

It was hard on Lucy, being separated from her mother. She was only four years old at the time. When Dede returned to Jamestown months later, she started working in a metal factory. It was there she met a tall Swedish man named Ed Peterson.

**NOAH GOODLING**: He was said to be fairly well read, cut a striking figure, liked to dress in expensive suits.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: That’s Noah Goodling. He’s a historian in Jamestown.

**NOAH GOODLING**: I think Lucy describes him as an ugly, handsome Swede.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Ed also liked to drink. He brewed his own beer at home. He was fun. And given everything Dede had been through, she was ready for some fun. They dated and in 1918, a month after Lucy turned seven, Dede and Ed got married. Though Ed made it clear, he didn’t want to be a father.

**NOAH GOOLDING**: There's this very powerful story that Lucy recounts about the wedding day between Ed and Dede, where Lucy wants another father figure in her life. She loved Henry. And she comes up to Ed on this wedding day. And with her, you know, most flirtatious expression says, are you going to be my new daddy? And Ed says, call me Ed.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Soon after the wedding, Dede and Ed left Jamestown. They went to Detroit to look for better work. Freddy stayed in Grandpa Hunt’s house. Dede worried it would be too much for her parents to care for two young children. So, Lucy went to live with Ed’s parents across town. Charles and Sophia Peterson. They were religious. And Grandma Peterson wanted to make sure Lucy stayed on a straight and narrow path.

**LUCY STUDD**: So, there were many times where kids were playing outside. And Lucy would have to do chores inside.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy was rambunctious. Not a good fit with Grandma Peterson’s old world, puritanical ways.

**CLEO SMITH**: Lucille drove her crazy.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: That’s Cleo Mandicos. She was Lucy’s cousin.

**CLEO SMITH**: I mean, she really, she annoyed Grandma Peterson so much. It was like, sit still, you know? She was just motion motion motion.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy didn’t have a lot of playmates at the Petersons. But she did have her imagination. Lucy had dolls made out of clothespins.

**LUCILLE BALL**: I had beautiful little dolls, but I was taught to make clothes for them and I had shoe boxes for their houses and their cradles are. That was all great fun.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: That’s Lucy from an interview sometime in the 1960s. It was published in a digital scrapbook. She would create whole worlds with those dolls.

**LUCILLE BALL**: And I used to welcome a rainy day because I was allowed to play on the back porch in a certain little, tiny area. And I know that that was wonderful. I still remember that. I can tell you conversations and see the clothes and the dolls right now and the kind of day and the way the rain was coming down and the color of the grass and what the flowers did when it rain, how they close up and what the bushes did and how the trees dripped and how they glistened.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy guesses she lived with the Petersons for a little over 2 years, but said it felt like six.

**LUCILLE BALL**: It was a little confining. It was a little embarrassing. It was a little hard for a child to understand.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Of course, it was hard for an 8- or 9-year-old to understand. All Lucy wanted was to be with her family again. To be surrounded by the people she knew - the ones who made her feel safe. It was the beginning of Lucy’s long battle with an illness she swore she could never shake - homesickness. When Lucy was 10 years old, she left Grandma Peterson’s and moved to Celeron, a small lakeside village just outside of Jamestown. Grandpa Hunt bought a house there. This marks the beginning of the most stable period in Lucy’s childhood. The house is still in Celeron. It’s on what used to be 8th street. Now it’s called Lucy Lane.

**BILL RAPAPORT**: So, my name is Bill Rapaport. My wife and I bought Lucy's childhood home.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Bill’s a retired professor of computer science. He and his wife Mary don’t live in the house. They run it like a private museum.

**BILL RAPAPORT**: Why did we buy it? Because my wife is a major Lucy fan. When my wife was recovering from breast cancer surgery and chemotherapy in nineteen ninety-nine. What kept her going and kept her spirits up was watching I Love Lucy reruns.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: His wife Mary restored the house to look like it would have in the 1920s. It’s not big - though it sits on a large plot of land. Grandpa Hunt paid $2000 for it. It’s a two-story with blue-gray siding. The windows are trimmed in a golden yellow. There’s a front porch too.

**BILL RAPAPORT**: So come on in. And I usually start the tours in the kitchen. And Fred lived here with his wife, Flora Belle, Lucy's grandmother. And they moved the rest of the family in.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: The entire family - Dede and Ed. Freddy and Lucy. Even Lucy’s cousin Cleo would eventually move in. There’s no doubt Celeron was a special place, especially back then. The family house was just a few blocks from Lake Chautauqua.

**LUCILLE BALL**: Well, the lake was 20, about 23 miles long, and a mile or two wide in some areas and half a mile in other areas and very deep and very cold and very wonderful for Muskellunge, I remember that fish, oh boy! My grandfather used to even fish through the ice in the wintertime and we used to do ice skating in the wintertime on the lake. And of course, we never went to the lake without a cake of soap in our hands in the summertime, which really is a fond memory. I used to hate it, but my grandfather never missed a chance. Of course, that's before we had the bathroom.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: The village of Celeron was small, about 800 residents, but come summer, thousands came by train or trolley. Even by steamboat. They came for the Celoron Amusement Park, which was built on the banks of the lake. It was so close to Lucy’s house; she could hear the sounds of the amusement park from her front porch.

**CLEO SMITH**: Ah! Celeron Park in the summertime, of course, that was IT. Every single night. Because there was always something going on at the bandstand

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: There was a dance hall and a stage for bands and vaudeville performers.

**LUCILLE BALL**: We still saw Sousa's band in concert.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: That’s John Phillip Sousa - he composed The Stars and Stripes Forever.

**LUCILLE BALL**: We still saw the outdoor movies, you know, "Perils of Pauline."

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy loved The Perils of Pauline. It was a silent film that became a serial about a female heroine who puts off marriage for a life of adventure. The kind of life Lucy would spend most of her teenage years in search of. And of course, there were rides - carnival rides, a wooden roller coaster, and a hot air balloon.

**CLEO SMITH**: And I don't remember, you know, that we had a lot of money to be spending on rides. It was so much excitement, the lights and things and the roller coaster going in the Ferris wheel, and you could just watch. And it was exciting we didn’t even have to go on them.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: As soon as Lucy was old enough, she spent summers working in Celeron Park. And she hammed it up.

**LUCILLE BALL**: I was making hamburgers and I used to holler: look out, look out, don't step over there! Step over here and have a hamburger!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Grandpa Hunt was still working in the furniture factory. Dede got a job selling hats at a department store in Jamestown. Lucy remembers watching her mother paying the family bills. They paid for a lot of things on credit, which back then was called paying “on time.”

**LUCILLE BALL**: So, Sunday afternoon or something where she would sit down and go over the little little pieces of bills is all I remember, where she doled out like a dollar twenty five for the insurance and four dollars and 17 cents for something else because everything was on time. All the furniture. We wouldn't have had any if we hadn't bought it on time, we wouldn’t have had a refrigerator or a washing machine or anything.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Even though Dede’s husband Ed was living in the house, it was Grandpa Hunt who remained head of the household - the real father figure in the family. Lucy’s grandmother Flora Belle took care of things at home while the other adults went to work.Months after Lucy moved to Celoron, Flora Belle got sick. She had uterine cancer. In the summer of 1922, just before Lucy turned 11, Flora Belle Hunt died. She was 55 years old. In the first decade of her life, Lucille Ball lost her father and her grandmother. She was separated from her mother for at least three years, and she lived in eight different places. That’s a lot of grief and a lot of change in a young girl’s life. After Flora Belle died, Lucy, Fred and Cleo were on their own after school. Grandpa Hunt, Dede, and Ed - they all worked long hours. Lucy was in charge while the adults were at work.

**FRED BALL**: She was bossy. That's for sure. Lucy kept track of the house and all the cleaning and some of the cooking and so forth. And I was doing whatever she wanted to be done.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: In the evenings, the front living room became a gathering place for the family. Especially in winter. There was a piano…

**FRED BALL**: Dede was quite accomplished at the piano. Lucy was inclined and she got one through the school, I think, a saxophone. She would play the saxophone not very well, but she'd play it. And my grandfather was adept at a mouth organ and the bones. And then the saw, he would take this, put the saw between his legs and we made music.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy hung a sheet in the archway into the living room. It was a makeshift stage curtain. She would direct Freddy and Cleo in plays. The only thing missing was an audience. On Saturdays, Grandpa Hunt would take Lucy to see vaudeville shows. They were incredibly popular - they were basically comedy acts with song and dance mixed in.

**LUCILLE BALL**: So, all I knew was I wanted to be in vaudeville, and I wanted to make people laugh. I certainly didn't want to make them cry; you know.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: When Lucy was 12, she saw a show that she’d remember for the rest of her life. But Grandpa Hunt didn’t take her - her stepdad, Ed Peterseon, did.

**LUCILLE BALL**: He said, Lucille, I know that you like performing, being in show biz show business, and maybe someday you can. I said, oh, I want to be in vaudeville. And he's said, well, there’s vaudeville. But he said there are other kinds of show business. And he said, show business performers can do magical things. I said, I don't do magic. And he said, no, no. I said do magical things with words.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Her stepfather then explained a job description we don’t use anymore. A monologist. Someone who entertains by telling stories on stage.

**LUCILLE BALL**: And he said a great monologist is coming to your school on the Chautauqua circuit. And his name is Julius Tannen. And I want you to see one of the greatest monologists ever. So, I thought it sounds pretty dull, guy telling stories for two hours as I wanted to see vaudeville, but I got to see Julius Tannen. And he sat in a chair. He had a table, a pitcher, a glass, one bulb, one bulb overhead. He was six six. Two and a half hours later, a mesmerized auditorium had been crying, sobbing, laughing hysterically. You could hear a pin drop in some places for ten minutes at a time. He told I don't know how many stories. I can't remember anything he said. But the way he did it and when we got out, my stepfather said, now, that is show business. That is magic.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: And that’s what Lucy wanted - she wanted magic. When The Plot Thickens returns, Lucy falls in love with the baddest bad boy in Jamestown.

 [BREAK]

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: By the mid 20s, Lucy had grown into a skinny, long-legged teenager. Her wavy hair was brown then. She had bright blue eyes and an even brighter personality. She was, by all accounts, a handful. She had plenty of friends at the Celeron school.

**FRED BALL**: I know she was always the leader of the pack, whichever pack she was with at the time.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: She was active. She played sports. Joined clubs. According to some, she was a little wild.

**NOAH GOODLING**: Lucy really loved attention. She would do stunts and tricks and all sorts of things so that people would pay attention to Lucy.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: That’s Jamestown historian Noah Goodling.

**NOAH GOODLING**: She would get up to all sorts of antics. She would skip school. She would leave town without warning She would get involved with some shady characters, drive around town to quickly steal things. You know, she sounds kind of fun if you ask me, but I think that Lucy was probably not always beloved and people maybe were a little afraid when they saw her because it's like, what's Lucy going to get up to today.

**LUCILLE BALL**: I was a leader of sorts. I know that Dede helped me a great deal there because she had my hair always. I could lead in the hair styles. For instance, you know, girls first got boy bobs and wore open galoshes and a great fur coat she got me. Was that a possum or a raccoon? The raccoon fur coat. Dede wasn’t high style, but she was always in style because she worked and and bought me nice clothes. I always had nice clothes.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: The first to have a boy bob, open galoshes and wear a racoon fur coat. That’s a lot of style for the streets of Jamestown. One summer day at the Celeron amusement park, a friend Irene DeVita introduced her to her older brother, Johnny. He was short, stocky and had a fancy car. He was 21 years old. Lucy was 14.

**NOAH GOODLING**: Johnny DeVita was like the prototypical bad boy.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy was immediately infatuated. Johnny’s father Louis DeVita imported olive oil but made more money selling bootleg liquor. He could also be found in illegal gambling halls. His was a very small-time operation, but still mob connected.

**NOAH GOOLDING**: And Johnny was following right along in his his father's footsteps. He carried a gun. He was involved with the drinking and the bootlegging. He smoked cigars, pretty much any kind of negative bad behavior that you can think of. He had it and he had style to go along with it. He had the expensive suits, and he had the nice stuff. I can't imagine a more appealing target for a young girl who wanted attention and wanted attention on her.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Johnny DeVita was Lucy’s first love. And like many first loves, it was intense and dramatic. Full of fury and excitement. And a little danger.

**FRAN ROSELLI**: I never saw him without a suit or tie.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Fran Roselli is Johnny DeVita’s nephew. It was his mother Irene who introduced Lucy to Johnny.

**FRAN ROSELLI**: And Uncle John. Most of the time he had a carnation in his lapel. I still remember that. He always liked carnations.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: After Irene died, her son Fran inherited the boxes of letters and photographs that Johnny kept. Stuff from Lucy - stuff the family rarely shared with anyone. Especially after Lucy became famous.

**FRAN ROSELLI**: So, for the last six months, little bit at a time, I've been going through stuff and I keep finding more, more stuff as I go along.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Fran has Johnny’s chauffeur’s license.

**FRAN ROSELLI**: That's Johnny when he was young.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: He was definitely handsome. Kind of like a young Robert DeNiro.

**FRAN ROSELLI**: It was easier just to have a chauffeur's license. It was during prohibition, you know. So a big Cadillac won't be weighted down as much as some of the others.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Weighted down by alcohol. Johnny would pick up booze in Canada or Buffalo and drive it back down to Jamestown to sell on the black market. Johnny and Lucy quickly got a reputation in town.

**FRAN ROSELLI**: The hussie that was going out with the bootlegger and the age difference and everything else.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Johnny had influence in Jamestown. Fran says when Johnny entered the ballroom at Celeron Amusement Park, people stopped to look. Everyone knew who he was.

**FRAN ROSELLI**: You know, it's like the young girls with these rock singers and everything, you know, except this wasn't one night stand type thing. It lasted.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: It lasted alright. Lucy and Johnny dated on and off for the next 6 years. Fran has stacks of letters Lucy wrote to Johnny during that time. Her penmanship was really neat and precise - She wrote in cursive, with a dramatic capital J for Johnny.

**FRAN ROSELLLI**: Now, this sounds like a young girl. It says, have a couple of minutes to spare?

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Fran reads a letter Lucy sent to Johnny early in their relationship.

**FRAN ROSELLI**: What time do you get up? What time you go to bed? What did you do? Who did you go out with after I got through? Are you coming to meet me after school? What are you going to do tonight? Did you win anything last night? When are you going to let me shoot crap? How do you feel towards me today? Say, do you ever dream of me?

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy signed her letters Lou or Slim, both nicknames Johnny gave her. She called him Doc. Lucy would ride on the front of Johnny’s car, daring everyone to look at them. The bootlegger and his pretty young girlfriend. Lucy’s need for attention, to take up space, was almost primal. She didn’t know then that an audience of millions was in her future. At this point, her only audience was Jamestown. The audience of small towns. The most unforgiving kind.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: The people of Jamestown judged Lucy for dating Johnny. She got a reputation. And they judged Dede for letting it happen.

**FRED BALL**: First thing, Dede didn't have total control over Lucille.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy’s brother Fred.

**FRED BALL**: Lucille was her own person.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Cousin Cleo says Dede was worried about Lucy’s relationship with Johnny. Especially since he was running liquor across borders.

**CLEO SMITH**: I think it was known just by everybody that he was running a bootleg to Canada and back. And she knew that Lucy or certainly feared that she did, that she would ride with him.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Dede talked to Johnny. She talked to his family. And she talked to Lucy too. But nothing changed. Lucy was in love. But there was one thing that could distract Lucy from Johnny.

**CLEO SMITH**: Fortunately, Lucille did have a focus and she did know she wanted to be a performer and she did know that she wanted to go to Hollywood or New York or someplace exciting.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy heard about a drama school in New York City. She pestered Dede to let her go. It must have occurred to Dede that this was a way to get Lucy away from Johnny. On Merv Griffin’s talk show, Dede remembered Lucy asking her if she could go to New York.

**DEDE**: Well, I said, how long do I have to think it over? She said, well, I have to have my tuition here or something. So I said, okay. So I thought about it for two days and told her she could go.

**FRED BALL**: Dede did have confidence in Lucille's ambition and energy and drive and knew there was a potential.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Dede arranged for Lucy to live with a friend of hers - a woman who used to be her hairdresser.

**LUCILLE BALL**: I was allowed to go away and stay with friends of the family here in New York City. They lived on Dykeman Street. And I went to the John Murray Anderson Robert Milton dramatic school.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy was 15 when Johnny drove her to Buffalo. She boarded a train to New York with $50 sewn into her underwear. The drama school was run by respected theater professionals. It was in an ornate building on east 58th street between Park and Lexington. Lucy felt like a foreigner in this world.

**LUCILLE BALL**: I was taking eccentric dancing and elocution. That's what they called it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy talked about it years later on The Tonight Show.

**LUCILLE BALL**: I was terrified of New York and terrified of people and crowds and and a whole bunch of newcomers, you know, right out of your second year high.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy was especially intimidated by a classmate at the school. Her name was Ruth Elizabeth Davis. Known to everyone as Bette Davis. She was the star pupil. Lucy was mesmerized by her. And so envious. Of course, Bette Davis later become a defining figure of classic Hollywood. When it came time to give a dramatic reading, Lucy’s classmates read Shakespeare. Lucy chose an excerpt from Julius Tannen, the monologist who inspired her back in Jamestown. Nothing she did fit in. After six weeks, one of the heads of the school wrote to Dede.

**LUCILLE BALL**: And they sent a letter to my mother saying she was wasting her money and she she was, I believe it or not, was reticent and shy and never opened my mouth and wouldn't perform at all and they sent me home.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: The letter said Lucy didn’t have what it takes to be an actress. She had been so homesick, part of her was relieved. But she had to face the people of Jamestown. Dede was criticized for allowing her 15-year-old daughter to go to New York. Merv Griffin asked Dede about it.

**DEDE**: What did the town of Jamestown, New York, think? You don't really want to hear that. Were they really horrified? They sure were. And do they really almost ostracize you for doing. Absolutely. When they see me coming down the street, they turn the head the other way.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Lucy resumed life as a high school teenager, walking right back into Johnny’s arms. She threw herself into school activities. She was popular and in love. The embarrassment of New York started to fade. Things were going well, a return to normal. But then, the summer Lucy turned 16, something horrible happened. Something that would destroy her family.

**BILL RAPAPORT**: All right. So this is the backyard.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Bill Rapaport is standing in the backyard of Lucy’s childhood home in Celeron.

**BILL RAPAPORT**: The property goes all the way to the next street there

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: The yard takes up three additional lots behind the house. It’s a long, open field, one that in the 1920s had lilac bushes and a hen house. It was in this backyard, on a July 4th weekend in 1927 that everything changed. Cleo was 8 and Lucy’s younger brother Fred was 12. That July 4th weekend, Fred wanted to practice shooting a rifle at tin can targets in the backyard.

**FRED BALL**: We under grandpa's supervision, had a little rifle practice, a 22-rifle practice in the backyard.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Grandpa Hunt actually didn’t want to have target practice that day. But he adored his grandson. Called him Fritzie Boy. Fred pleaded with him.

**CLEO SMITH**: He said, “Oh Grandpa, you'll be with us, and you know, you load the gun and just, and just.” And of course, Grandpa would do anything for Fred anyhow.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Fred had a friend with him, a young girl named Johanna Ottinger.

**FRED BALL**: She was somebody I knew from my work in Celeron Park. And she came up and grandpa was there, and we were shooting the rifle and Cleo was there and a little neighbor from next door was there. They were sitting on the ground.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: The little neighbor boy was 8-year-old Warner Erickson. He lived in the house next door.

**CLEO SMITH**: Warner was my friend. He was my age. And Warner and I were playmates together.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Cleo remembers Grandpa setting the rules for target practice. He would load the gun before anyone took a shot. Cleo and Warner were instructed to sit on the ground where they could watch but stay out of harm’s way. Grandpa loaded the gun and handed it to Fred. He took his shot. Then it was Johanna Ottinger’s turn.

**CLEO SMITH**: And the girl has the gun and she's sighting the target.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Johanna holds the gun up to her eye.

**CLEO SMITH**: Meantime Warner's mother, who was very strict. She looks out her window and she can see us in the yard, and she yells "War-ner!"

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Whenever Warner’s mother called, he jumped to attention. Warner whispered to Cleo: I got to go. Warner darted toward home.

**CLEO SMITH**: And like kids, Warner, sees his mother, he's going to duck under the gun and it shoots.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: At the same moment… Johanna Ottinger pulled the trigger. The bullet lodged in Warner’s back.

**CLEO SMITH**: And he just fell sprawled on the ground. And he yelled, I'm shot, I'm shot. Of course, Grandpa, denial. No, you're not. You're not, not.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: But then Grandpa Hunt saw all the blood on Warner’s shirt. Cleo remembers Grandpa running inside to call an ambulance. Then he picked Warner up and carried him to the house next door where his mother, Mrs. Erickson was waiting.

**CLEO SMITH**: And she began ranting and raving. And you killed my son. You killed my son.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: It was a terrible accident. The security Lucy felt in that little house by the lake. In the shadow of an amusement park. It shattered that summer afternoon. She would spend the rest of her life trying to get it back.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: Next time on The Plot Thickens: Lucy and her family face the aftermath of the shooting.

**FRED BALL**: That accident changed our lives entirely.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ**: And Lucy goes to New York again and this time the big city nearly breaks her.

**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**: 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 Peletier. Production support from Jordan Boge, Bailey Tyler, Alison Firor, Julie Bitton, Mario Rials, Susana Zepeda, Liz Winter and Reid Hall. Web support by Betsy Gooch. Thanks to David Byrne, Wendy Gardner, Taryn Jacobs, Diana Bosch and the entire TCM Marketing team.

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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.