Mrs. Tolson

A Short Story based on Historical Figures

By Maryanne Peters

I was proud to work for Clyde Tolson. He was a good man in the way a man should be – he was strong without using force, persuasive without bully, and confident without being noisy. He was quiet but determined and always thought of him as being masculine.

He was tall with a strong jaw and a solid nose – handsome in the way a man should be handsome, and with a smile that could brighten a room. But he was a serious man with a serious job. He was Associate Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation when I went to work for that organization straight out of college in 1960. By that time Mr. Tolson has already been in his job for 30 years, but then again his boss had been in his job for close to 40 years. His boss was, of course, John Edgar Hoover.

In 1960 Hoover was 65 years old, and Mr. Tolson was 60. Hoover had joined the Justice Department in 1917 and had worked through two world wars. Mr. Tolson joined in 1928. It was well known that he had ambition to set up his own legal practice and that the Bureau was only a stepping stone, but once he came to the attention of Hoover, his rise was meteoric.

It was said that his skills were in administration, and in particular in “Personnel and Discipline” – what we now call “Human Resources”. Certainly that was never where Hoover’s skill laid. Hoover was a manipulator and if he had been in charge of personnel good agents would have left in droves. Mr. Tolson knew that too. He understood that good people are to be valued, not abused.

Mr. Tolson said privately that they were a team, he and Hoover, but publicly he gave proper deference to his boss. They were a team. Even a marriage – in all but name.

If you are reading this story in expectation of lurid accounts of homosexual sex then I suggest you look elsewhere. To my knowledge nobody ever witnessed that between these men, and nobody ever should. But that is true for every marriage. Marriage is about love and commitment, and this story is too. But it is not really a story about two men, as I shall explain.

I actually met Hoover before I met Mr. Tolson. When I was hired the Bureau was reeling from some disclosures concerning what was called “COINTELPRO”. This was a covert “dirty tricks” program to disrupt “subversive organizations” including the Communist Party USA. For years Hoover had used the threat of communism to underpin his budget requests and had exaggerated the extent of communist influence in liberal organizations and state and central government. Hoover was also incensed by the Courts limiting his ability to act as he wished.

I had long hair when I applied to the FBI and the recruiter suggested that I not get a haircut until I was through training. At Quantico I met others who had been told the same. We were being lined up to infiltrate youthful pressure groups as a part of COINTELPRO.

A group of us were sent to meet with the Director himself. We filed into his office in our suits and long hair, a couple with beards. Hoover was seated behind his huge desk, elevated a little so he could look bigger that he really was.

He outlined his plans. He told us that our country faced a threat from subversive elements and that while he wanted to prosecute, the Courts were tying our hands. He said that the answer was intelligence. He said something about his work in two world wars, and that the “Cold War” was the worst yet – “Because people don’t know it is happening”.

He explained that we needed to pursue key targets – individuals and groups. The individuals were mainly celebrities as I saw it – people like Charlie Chaplin, John Lennon and Muhammad Ali. The groups were civil rights groups and anti-war movements. Hoover said that we needed to observe and record, and for that he needed wiretaps, document “sequestration” and infiltration. Sequestration meant burglaries and theft, the wiretaps were illegal and infiltration was based on lies. But that was how the FBI was run under Hoover – the ends justify the means.

There was more too. Hoover planted forged documents, manipulated wire tap recordings, spread false rumors and did whatever he wanted. There have been theories about where his power came from – secret dossiers on presidents and the like – but in those days much of the country was behind Hoover. He had the support of the people. “Get tough on crime” was the same as “Keep Hoover”.

And for me? What did I think about all of this? I wanted to be part of it. I wanted to do things the FBI way. I don’t need to tell my life story, but where I came from, the only thing more corrupt than the County Sheriff was the State Police. The FBI seemed to be the model of efficiency and the dogged pursuit of wrongdoing, by whatever means. I was all in.

A lot of it came undone with the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities chaired by Frank Church – “The Church Committee”. The activities of COINTELPRO were declared to be “illegal and contrary to the Constitution”.

But in the meantime, I had gone to work directly for Clyde Tolson initially recruiting and managing “Special Special Agents” drawn from minorities or with specific skills of use to the Bureau. When Mr. Tolson suffered a stroke in 1964 any other agent would have been retired out, but Hoover was intent that Mr. Tolson continue in the job despite the fact that he had become uncertain on his feet and appeared frail. Both of them needed somebody that they could trust to care for him, and that person was me.

It is widely known that the men were close. Hoover called Mr. Tolson his “alter ego”. The men were inseparable. They lived close together and a driver would pick them both up and drive them to work or to breakfast together in one of their favorite places. They would work in adjoining offices and then after work they would dine together and keep company until it was time for them to retire to their own homes just to sleep.

Did they sleep together? Most certainly they did. They holidayed together and Mr. Tolson had a guest room in Hoover’s house which contained a wardrobe of his clothes and a bed that I wonder was ever slept in.

How do I know? Well, at this point I have a disclosure to make. Although I did not fully appreciate it at the time, I was a transsexual, and I had always been one. I retired from the in 1993 and I had surgery to become female. I have lived as a woman ever since then, and I had planned to do that ever since Hoover died in 1972.

When Hoover died his entire estate passed to his heir – Clyde Tolson. Mr Tolson received the flag at Hoover’s funeral and moved into his house to see out his days. He even took over as Acting Director of the FBI for exactly 1 day. He died three years later on April 14, 1975.

For many of those final years I spent time with him. I told him what I wanted to do, and he urged me to follow through with my plan.

“If we did not live in a fishbowl then nothing would have made us happier that if Edie had been able to live with me as my wife,” he said.

By “Edie” he was referring to his wife – Mrs. Tolson, Joanne Edith, nee Hoover.

Hoover always denied that he was homosexual. That was right. He never was. He disliked homosexuals. He considered them weak and depraved. Weak because they gave into desires that were illegal, and depraved because they craved to have sex with others. For all those that consider that he was what is nowadays called “gay” and hypocritical for attacking gay behavior, I say that you need to understand him. While his male personality was aggressive and bombastic, he had another personality, and it was very different.

Hoover lived with his mother well into his forties. Mr. Tolson would say that when he first visited Hoover at home it was in “Mother’s house”. There Hoover was free to be his mother’s daughter, and as Mr Tolson said “I fell in love with her”.

Hoover’s mother had died in 1937. There is no doubt that she played a big part in his life. Perhaps she wished that she had brought a daughter into the world? Or perhaps she just recognized in her son some innate femininity which she needed to nurture and allow release in the privacy of the family home? I understood that she allowed Edie to flourish in her own way, with nobody but them knowing anything about her, until her suitor came to call.

I often wonder if I had been brought up that way whether I ever would have set foot outside as anything other than a woman. But Hoover was a special kind of man. He was able to draw a line between himself and Edie and never allow that line to be crossed.

There were plenty who suspected that he might be homosexual, but they had it all wrong. Even before I joined the FBI there were rumors, many promoted by the writer Truman Capote who seemed to take a salacious pleasure in prodding Hoover. He once said that he was “more interested in making Hoover angry than determining whether the rumors were true”.

After I became part of their inner circle the sex magazine “Screw” published the article "Is J. Edgar Hoover a Fag?" Reference was made to his relationship with Mr. Tolson and various reference to intimate moments, although none of them sexual or even physical. The story about Hoover painting Mr. Tolson’s toenails is laughable. It was Hoover who had painted toenails, just as he had a shaved body.

There was no homosexuality here. Edie was a woman. She just masqueraded as a man during the day, and it just so happened that the man she pretended to be was one of the most powerful men in the country – perhaps the most powerful.

That power enabled Hoover to avoid making his own denials but to expect them from others. Plenty were asked. All had the same answer – Hoover and Tolson work as closely as brothers, but that is the relationship. There is nothing of a sexual nature.

Is that true, you might wonder? I have to say that even I do not know for sure, even knowing what I do. Did Mr and Mrs Tolson ever have sex?

McCarthy attorney Roy Cohn was a known closet homosexual and I know for a fact that his opinion was that “Hoover was too frightened of his own sexuality to have anything approaching a normal sexual or romantic relationship”. You can call Cohn what you like, but he was clever, and he had direct experience. The fact is that Hoover was conflicted. He did not regard himself as a homosexual. I honestly believe that just like me, he wanted to be a woman and a wife to his man. Perhaps that meant that their relationship could never be sexual?

In their recent book “The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover amd the Great American Inquisition” Cox and Theoharis comment that “it is likely that Hoover never knew sexual desire at all”. Is that possible?

You do not need sexual desire to love. If you love somebody enough is sex really that important? I used to think that it wasn’t. When I had my surgery I was happy just to be a woman. I had sexual capacity but I doubted that I would ever use it. And then I met a man and he wanted to enter my vagina and I never looked back.

I often wondered if Hoover could have secretly changed his anatomy would he and Mr. Tolson have had sex? He could still be a man when he worked and a woman and wife when he didn’t. But he never did. He was too famous. I am not and so I was able to.

His release was to dress as a woman at home. I am aware that there were stories about Hoover going to clubs or parties dressed as a woman, but this would seem to me to be highly doubtful. He was aware of his position but he was also very aware of the effect of compromising material. He had large amounts of it, on many people. He would not let it be hel know all about

But why was Hoover so vitriolic in his attacks on homosexuals and liberals?

One of the areas I worked in at the FBI was in building the Behavioral Science Unit. It was first set up in 1972 using regular agents some of whom the Bureau sent back to college to study psychology. My of the work on criminal profiling involved understanding sexuality. My own opinions are based on discussion with people from the BSI as well as my understanding of my own position.

Hoover came from a conservative background. He believed that men were men and women were women, but that he was one of the latter. Being the person he was he did not agonize over it. He found a way to cope. One was to become asexual, meaning that he had to forgo sex totally.

Then in Mr Tolson he met a man whom he trusted so much that he could be allowed to meet his true self. That changed everything. They became a secret husband and wife.

Perhaps my own role in this was to become the younger man who could achieve that ends that would always be denied Edie because of Hoover’s fame? I like to think so. I like to think that if there is a heaven and if Hoover is in it (both of which may be a stretch) then Hoover looks down on me with approval as I am now complete and happy, and I even have a husband this late in my life.

But I never warmed to Hoover in the same way that I did Mr. and Mrs. Tolson. Perhaps because she was so pleasant and good natured Hoover felt able to be the opposite. Let’s face it, he was nasty and vindictive. He was able to distance Edie so completely that he could say he had no homosexual leanings at all. Fags were weak and depraved. He was upright and pure. Mr. Tolson was loyal and loving. I was what he could never be – able to cross over.

The End

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