Lucy, Truman Capote

Lucy

Lucy was really the outgrowth of my mother's love for southern cooking. I was spending the summer in the south when my mother wrote my aunt and asked her to find her a colored woman who could really cook and would be willing to come to New York.

After canvassing the territory, Lucy was the result. Her skin was a rich olive and her features were finer and lighter than most negroes'. She was tall and reasonably round. She had been one of the teachers at the school for colored children. But she seemed to have a natural intelligence, not formed by books, but a child of the earth with a deep understanding and compassion for all that lived. As most southern negroes, she was very religious, and even now, I can see her sitting in the kitchen reading her Bible, and declaring most earnestly to me that she was a "child of God."

So we had Lucy, and when she stepped off the train that September morning at Pennsylvania Station, you could see the pride and the triumph in her eyes. She told me that all her life she had wanted to come north, and, as she put it, "to live like a human being." That morning she felt that she would never want again to see Jim Crow with all its bigotry and cruelty. At that time we lived in an apartment on Riverside Drive. From all of the front windows we had an excellent view of the Hudson River and the Jersey Palisades, rising steep against the sky. In the morning they looked like heralds greeting the dawn and in the evening, at sunset, when the water was dyed in the confusion of crimson shades, the cliffs shone magnificently, like sentinels of an ancient world.

Sometimes, at sunset, Lucy would sit at the apartment window and gaze lovingly at the spectacle of the dying day in the world's greatest metropolis.
"Um, um," she would declare, "if only Mama and George were here to see this." And at first she loved the bright lights and all the noise. Almost every Saturday she took me down to Broadway and we went on theatrical sprees. She was crazy about the vaudevilles, and the Wrigley sign was a show in itself.

Lucy and I were constant companions. Sometimes in the afternoon after school she would help me with my mathematical homework, she was very adroit at mathematics. She read a great deal of poetry, but she didn't know anything about it except that she loved the sound of the words, and occasionally the sentiment behind them. It was through these readings that I first became aware of how homesick she really was. When she read poems with a southern theme, she read them beautifully, with a unique compassion. Her soft voice recited the lines tenderly, understandingly, and if I glanced up quickly enough there was just the trace of a tear gleaming in the exquisite blackness of those negro eyes. Then she would laugh if I mentioned it and shrug her shoulders.

"It was pretty though, wasn't it?"
When Lucy worked she invariably accompanied her actions with a soft singing, "blues" in its quality. I liked to hear her sing. Once we went to see Ethel Waters and she went around the house imitating Ethel for days, then finally she announced she was going to enter an amateur contest. I'll never forget that contest. Lucy won second place, and my hands were raw from applauding. She sang "It's De-Lovely, It's Delicious, It's Delightful." I remember the words even now, we rehearsed them so

many times. She was scared to death she was going to forget them and when she went on the stage, her voice tremored just enough to give it a Ethel Waterish tone.

But eventually Lucy abandoned her musical career, because she met Pedro, and she didn't have time for much else. He was one of the basement workers in the building and he and Lucy were thicker than molasses. Lucy had been in New York only five months when this happened and she was still, technically speaking, green. Pedro was very slick, he dressed flashy, and besides I was mad because I didn't get to go to the shows anymore. Mama laughed and said, "Well, I guess we've lost her, she'll go northern too." She didn't seem to care so much, but I did.
Finally, Lucy didn't like Pedro either, and then she was more lonesome than ever. Sometimes I would read her mail when it was lying around open. It went something like this,

Dear Lucy,
Yu Pa he's got sick, he in bed now. He say, hallo. We guess now yo up thea yo hev no time fo us po folk. Yo brother, George, he done gone to Pensacola, he work in bottle factry thea. We sends you all ouah love,
Mama

Sometimes, late at night, I could hear her softly crying in her room, and then I knew she was going home. New York was just vast loneliness. The Hudson River kept whispering "Alabama River." Yes, Alabama River with all its red muddy water flowing high to the bank and with all its swampy little tributaries.

All the bright lights—a few lanterns shining in the darkness, the lonely sound of a whip-poor-will, a train screaming its haunting cry in the night. Hard cement, bright cold steel, smoke, burlesque, the smothered sound of the subway in the dank, underground tube. Rattle, Rattle,—soft green grass—and yes sun, hot, plenty hot, but so soothing, bare feet, and cool, sand-bedded stream with soft round pebbles smooth, like soap. The city, no place for one of the earth, Mama's calling me home. George, I'm God's child.

Yes, I knew she was going back. So when she told me she was leaving I wasn't surprised. I opened and shut my mouth and felt the tears in my eyes and the empty feeling in my stomach.

It was in May that she left. It was a warm night and the sky over the city was red in the night. I gave her a box of candy, all chocolate-covered cherries (because that was what she liked best), and a pack of magazines.

Mother and Daddy drove her to the bus station. When they left the apartment I ran to my window and leaned over the sill until I saw them come out and climb into the car, and slowly, gracefully glide out of view.

Already I could hear her saying, "Ohhhh, Mama, New York's wonderful, all the people, and I saw movie stars in person, oh, Mama!"

The End