



A Picture of Lucy Rose

by Sarah Hill

The last weekend of every September the fair stopped in town. There was neither a large park nor a broad street, so the town was forced to forego the luxury of rides, the yellow and red machines like giant spiders and hands, the long falling screams from the top of the sky to the roots of the grass—you could feel it under your shoes—other towns had parks for rides or at least parking lots. But in Bentonville, the widest street was narrow, the main street that dissected the town, houses brick with a row of geraniums out front to the north, clapboard and marigolds to the south, was created solely for pedestrian games. Not a beer can or a gum wrapper anywhere, either. Every week a red garbage truck with “Satisfaction Guaranteed or Double Your Trash Back” printed in white letters on the side lazed its way through a crisscross pattern the driver had arranged the town into. The children ran in front, throwing gum wrappers and bits of paper into the gutter, sure that they would be removed.

A row of booths rose overnight down each side of Main Street; by ten o'clock Saturday morning, frying sausage, onions, and peppers thickened the air, an almost liquid rich odor, with an occasional stab of sugar, elephant ears, cotton candy, blue, pink, white.

The fair, or festival it was called to distinguish it from the local carnivals specializing in chance games and suspicious young men in unreadable T-shirts, was intended to be a celebration of the turning leaves. But for the last five years, it had rained every day in September, was at least 80 degrees, and the only leaves that changed, and they were few, turned brown and fell in soggy heaps around the trunks of trees. No one was looking at the leaves anyway, except to shake off one or two that clung in tatters to their shoes as they stepped into their cars in the evening. No one looked higher than the top boards of the booths, where plastic dolls hung, strings around their stiff pink necks, their tiny arms and legs pointing out four directions. Or headbands stuck with feathers (this was once an Indian settlement) painted green and yellow, secured in plastic that was hidden by the hair of the wearer, a very authentic look. The booths were jammed up against either curb, leaving just enough street for traffic. The cars halted and children skipped and skidded between them, their mothers smiling apologetically under frowning eyebrows at the drivers, who smiled indulgently back, if they were leaving, avoided the look, if they were just arriving.

Henry Wright sat in his booth at the corner of Main and Oak streets. This had been his spot for ten years, slightly separated from the others, because of the cross street, but close enough to be convenient. The booth was on the lot of the best filling station in town, and people were sure to see it; he could see them leaning out of their windows as they drove past. Henry was an artist, a painter,

who disdained the popular use of disc blades and handsaws to decorate with barns in summer and winter creeks. His outbuildings and streams were on canvas, and he was careful to sign each one legibly, so the purchaser would remember his name. There were few buyers, but everyone looked, and Henry preferred to think that he catered to a select group who could tell the difference between real art and scene drawing.

A young couple approached, the woman two steps ahead and almost dragging her husband by the elbow, he eating something unidentifiable out of white paper. She ran her hand lightly down the sides of the frames of two or three and turned to look at the young man. He stooped to read the prices and straightened up again with a low whistle. Henry lit a cigarette, crossed his legs and focussed with determination on a yellow nylon cap swinging from a stall across the street. They would not buy. The cap had some insignia in the middle of the forehead, black letters, he thought, and the swaying motion reminded him absurdly of black-eyed susans, but the odor was wrong, it should be that aching brown weedy smell, not this sweet onion with the sugar wrapping, and then someone lifted the hat down abruptly, leaving a silver hook; Henry looked back and the couple had wandered away.

He began cataloguing the paintings he had brought with him—three barns, four streams, a small farmhouse—Henry half-closed his eyes against the brilliancy of the colors. Today was the first really blue autumn day of the year, and he remembered the black and white field, painted a dozen years before, that he had turned up in deciding what to bring with him. He had discarded it from the stack as unsalable, but now Henry wanted to see it again. He opened his eyes wider and mentally he walked through his front door, over the green carpet in the living room that bloomed here and there with rust-red coffee stains, and down the wooden steps—they were more slats than boards; Henry had built them himself after the others had collapsed—into the basement. The basement, only half sunken, was Henry's workroom. He would sit under the south windows that lined up under the ceiling and paint from memory; it was the only way he could really see what he wanted to come up on the canvas before him. The colorless field had been one of his father's; he could remember, as a child, perhaps eight or nine, lying in the gray grass and watching it melt into the sky as the light tilted into darkness early evenings. And the cornflowers and thistles, the wild daisies, disappeared and reappeared, rising into small faces without expression. He could be in it again without the confusion of color, his field could be a gray lake with disembodied faces floating on the surface, or an ashpit littered with the remains of dolls, their bodies armless like the stems of some weeds. Or a simple stretch of grass, where small women walked, their hands folded into their aprons, each face a wash of dark against a white background.

A middle-aged woman with hair a shade of glittering red too uniform to be natural, packed into a pair of discount-store polyester

slacks, held the small winter farmhouse, first at arms-length, then almost to her nose, then back out again. The sky in the painting was more intense than the one she held the canvas up into, and she whispered "beautiful" and "lovely" to herself, laying it on the concrete between her feet and the tissue skirt of the booth, and propping it against the peeling 2x4 at the corner. Henry watched her claw through her vinyl handbag, pause, "do you take credit cards?"—Henry shook his head, "I'm sorry, no, I don't"—resume the search almost headfirst, and finally emerge triumphant with a fat billfold. She counted out the bills, too many, with precision, and Henry noticed a mustard stain on her blouse. He turned to the tin cash box on the stool beside him where his cigarette also lay, the burning end off the edge. It rolled, when Henry opened the box, off-balance, onto the ground and under the tissue skirting. Henry's eyes could see the spark catch the paper, a smolder first, then just one more breeze and a rush of flame around the booth and up four corners at once. It would go up like a stall of old newspaper, like a cardboard dollhouse. The tissue curtains around the top would melt in a second, there would, of course, be time to step out, but there was no time to save the paintings that were wired to their hooks, the large ones, for security. Henry saw the snowy barns and blue reflective creeks curl out of their frames, the frames snap apart and fall, and a skyful of gray flakes swirl away across the roof of the filling station.

The woman in the polyester pants put a sneaker toe down on the cigarette and tightened her top lip. Henry noticed how her chin puckered with the look and how her underlip whitened. He placed the painting into a grocery sack for her, handed her the change, and knew he was expected to say "have a nice day."

A gray moth was hovering outside the window, the expected mottled color, but uncommonly large. When Lucy lifted her hand and tapped the glass, it rose suddenly away; Lucy saw two patches of orange, one on each wing, light up like small suns on a stormy morning. Then the moth was gone and the girl turned back toward her room. She should have been dressed before now, everyone would be at the fair already, but Pam, her best friend since they both were children, was out of town, and Lucy really had no one to go with. She opened her drawer and fingered first one sweater then another, the air had chilled overnight with the passing of the rain, until her mother called her down to breakfast. Lucy yanked the one on top over her head, stretching out the sleeves and not caring, stepped into her jeans and shoes with the motion of a colt walking through long wet grass, and headed toward the smell of cocoa and hot bread.

Her mother was setting out plates and cups, and Lucy slouched into a chair. To the question, "Are you going to the festival today?" she said "Uh-huh" in a tone neither resentful nor rebellious. Lucy asked, "Can I have some money?" and her mother countered, "Will you help me clean out the garage some time this weekend?" The girl shrugged and nodded, her mother said, "Such enthusiasm" and fished a ten-dollar bill out of her purse that always lay on the kitchen counter. When the daughter finished eating and started for the door,

she said good-bye to the mother without turning her head, and mother said have a good time without noticing.

Lucy walked the five blocks to the main street. A balloon floated above her head and tangled itself in a maple tree. She looked up and saw the sun through the branches. It lit up the first yellow in the trees. She had never looked at this tree before, although she had passed it almost every day of her life, and the color startled her for a moment. Lucy stepped into the street. She knew the traffic patterns of festival days and avoided the cars without looking at them. She scanned the edge of the crowd for another high-school face and, instead, met the eye of Mr. MacCaffrey, who sat beside a steaming cast-iron cauldron that had once been a scalding pot. Lucy had heard the story of the scalding pot. It had once belonged to her own grandfather and he had loaned it to the MacCaffreys, rusted as it was, from lack of use. The MacCaffreys had cleaned it to use at the festival, — this was before Lucy was even walking — and had used it every year since. Her father had asked for it back, and the MacCaffreys had claimed it was theirs now, citing all the work it had taken to clean it up as evidence. Lucy's father had let the matter drop, not wanting a dispute with old family friends. But every year at festival time he would say over dinner, "I ought to get that pot back" and Lucy's mother would agree.

The MacCaffreys were cooking barbecued pork. Lucy walked over to where Mr. MacCaffrey sat in a lawn chair, his face pink and sweating even though his son was doing the stirring. Lucy thought with his old white hair he looked like some pigs she had seen on her grandfather's farm. He said "Good morning, Lucy, where you hiding all your boyfriends?" and she smiled and said, "Hi, Mr. MacCaffrey, Mrs. MacCaffrey. Lucy looked into the pot. The pork was shredded and bubbling in the sauce; bits of flesh would cling to the sides of the pot and Mr. MacCaffrey's son scraped them down with a long paddle. The thought formed itself in Lucy's mind that it was like blood, that deep red. Her head, down the sides of her nose and between her eyes, started to ache with the smell. Lucy said, "See you later" and walked away. Mr. MacCaffrey smiled at his wife. They had known Lucy and her family for a long time.

Lucy walked down one side of the street past two or three booths. A woman was selling dolls, and she stopped at the sight of them. Laid out on the wooden counter were the expensive handsewn baby dolls. Their faces were quilted to form eyes, nose, mouth, even a small dimple on the chin. Behind these stood the rag dolls; their faces were merely painted on. On the chair beside the woman was a stack of plastic dolls, wrapped in cellophane. A dozen of these, no longer than Lucy's hand, were tucked in at the edges of the display. The dresses of these were hand-embroidered around the hem. Lucy chose a plastic doll and paid for it with part of the money her mother had given her. She unwrapped it as she walked away and laid it in her purse.

Across the street were booths of handicrafts, pottery and clothing. Lucy walked over and met a group of girls, older than herself. Their

eyes went through her deliberately and Lucy began sorting and arranging the coverlets and vests on a table as though she were deciding on something to buy. Scarves and belts were hanging from the top of the stall, and with a sudden small breeze a bright red twist of cloth curled into Lucy's hair and around her neck. She felt the heat rise in her face and as she freed herself the cloth came unhooked in her hand. It was a coarse, handwoven sash, long enough to wrap twice around her waist. The woman in the shadow of the booth looked at Lucy. Lucy opened her purse, pushed past the doll lying there, and brought out the correct amount. Then she peeled the price sticker from the corner of the sash and handed it, along with the money to the woman. She received it with a professional smile and said, "Thank you, dear."

Lucy tied the sash over her sweater, around her middle, so that just the fringed ends hung free. With the new weight on her waist, her chest was strangely cool, and she moved on without really seeing anything. She did, however, catch a glimpse of herself in a store window as she passed, and she was surprised to see how the new belt accentuated her figure. She had a slight build but looked like a grown woman with her waist cinched.

An alley intersected the main street, and it was closed to traffic during the festival. Three boys, or young men, had taken possession of it. They were playing a sort of ball game with the chunks of pavement from the alley's potholes. Each boy had a heavy stick in his hand and knocked a chunk so that it collided with the brick wall on whichever side of the alley was farthest from him. None would have admitted that it was a contest, but if any of them failed to drive his piece of pavement all the way across the alley, the others jeered and poked him, and he tried harder the next time.

When Lucy passed the alley, it was not she that caused them to glance up, but the flash of red. But they saw who it was instantly; Lucy was in their class at school and they raised their sticks from their game to follow her.

"Hey, Lucy Rose."

At the sound of her full name, the girl stopped. Something in it she was unaccustomed to, and she turned to identify what seemed to be familiar voices. She saw the three boys and tilted her chin up a bit. They repeated the name that had stopped her. "Hey, Lucy Rose, with the red belt, where you going?" The three pointed the sticks at her, as if they were weapons, and Lucy thought, for a second, of sticking her tongue out at them. Instead, she unwound the belt from her waist and flung one end of it at them, still holding onto the other end. The boys shrank as if she had pulled out a weapon greater than theirs and scooted back down the alley. Lucy watched until they were gone and then wadded up the cloth and shoved it into her jeans pocket. The air came up under her sweater and goose pimples rose on her arms and thighs.

Two girls from Lucy's school were just across the street from her, at the booth where she had first stopped. Lucy did not step over to them, deciding not to try and dodge the traffic again, which seemed

to have become heavier. The fair was only a block long and she could cross at the end of the street and maybe meet them coming back. Her purse bumped against her hip; she could feel the plastic head of the doll beating out the rhythm of her walk, timing the pace. And the belt in her pocket was uncomfortable. Lucy wore her jeans snug, like the other girls her age, and never carried anything in her pockets. She looked over her shoulder and pulled it out. The red cloth rippled and curled. Lucy flicked it out and tied it again around her. She shifted the bag on her shoulder and was completely readjusted by the time she crossed the intersection at the end of the block.

Lucy saw Henry before he saw her. She had always thought that Henry's eyes, when he smoked, sort of drifted and turned blank, but she could see, as she approached him from the side, that he was looking through the smoke, that his eyes were fixed on something across the street. She wondered what it was.

"Hi, Henry, what are you looking at?" Lucy ducked under the edge of the booth.

"Well, Lucy, hello." Henry set the cash box on the cement under his feet, and the girl sat down. "Look over there," Henry pointed to the parking area outside the telephone company down the cross street. "You see that little red car, the convertible? Now look right above it. That sycamore tree is going to drop about a thousand seeds into that car, and the guy who owns it is not going to notice because he's so happy that he spent all his money today, and next summer he's going to wonder where all the little sycamore trees in his yard came from because there aren't any in the subdivision where he lives." Lucy laughed and Henry added, "And the third time he mows them off and they grow back, he'll call the chemical company to come spray them."

"You're probably right, Henry." Lucy leaned back and stretched her legs out straight in front of her. "Sold anything today?"

"Yeah, one. It's a good thing I don't make my living this way."

Lucy smiled at him. She didn't know how Henry did make his living. She knew that he had lived in town until her grandfather retired from his farm, that he had moved into the farmhouse, that he was some kind of distant cousin through her father. He didn't keep any stock on the place, but the yard was mowed and he planted a garden every year. He kept the porch swing hanging, too, although he never painted it, and Lucy would ride her bicycle out Saturday mornings in summer and lie swinging until the sweat dried on her forehead and she could no longer hear her blood in her head.

"Do you need help packing your stuff up tonight?"

"You've got better things to do on Saturday night, don't you?"

Lucy shrugged, and he said, "I've got that small one for your mother. We can bring it back after we've unloaded everything."

"Why haven't you ever painted anything for me? My birthday's next week, and I have a big empty spot on my wall."

"Well, all right, I'll see what I can do. Be back about dark."

"O.K." Lucy stood up and walked away down the cross street back toward her house. Henry saw her meet Mrs. Anderson and her four-

year-old daughter. Lucy bent down to the little girl, and Henry saw how she and the older woman inclined together, their heads the same height and almost touching, the flow of their hair breaking across their shoulders and falling to where the child could reach up and pull it down to her. She did so, and Mrs. Anderson laughed, freeing herself and Lucy with a slight tug. Mrs. Anderson was a young woman and this was her first child.

Henry and Lucy worked for an hour after dark, crossing back to the pickup from the house and returning carrying one painting at a time. The only difficult part of the job was maneuvering down the basement stairs; you couldn't keep your balance looking over the top of the painting, and if you lifted it up, its shadow blackened the steps. So the only way was step by step blindly, toe first, then solid foot, a bounce to be sure, then the next step. Every time Lucy finally felt the concrete of the basement floor under her toe, cool and unyielding, her knees weakened a little and her insides felt as though a bag of marbles had burst there and scattered. She thought this was Henry's best work. She waited, sitting on a wooden stool with her heels in the rungs, while Henry brought down the last one and stacked it with the others. She saw Henry's gray field where he had set it out, away from the others and against the wall. Lucy picked the painting up from the floor. "Is this yours? Did you do this?"

"About a hundred years ago. Do you like it?"

"I think it's great. How come I've never seen it before?"

"I had it hidden. No, that's not true, I forgot about it. You really like it? Well, bring that stool for me and come upstairs. I'm going to do one for you like it."

Lucy picked up the stool. "It's going to be kind of hard to see the fields at night, isn't it?"

"I'm not going to do another field. You get to be the subject this time. Your mom knows where you are, doesn't she?"

"Me? Really?" Lucy stopped and lifted the stool in one hand. "You want me to sit on this?"

"You can sit wherever you want. That's for me. An old man can't paint standing up, you know."

Upstairs, Henry turned on every light in the living room. Lucy sat on the brick hearth in front of the cold fireplace and Henry set the stool by the window. The girl asked, "Is this all right?" and he answered "Fine, however you're comfortable." And he began to set an image of her on the canvas in black and white, or, no, in varying shades of gray. She filled the hearth, and Henry shaded in her eyes dark. Lucy had a strong brow, like her mother. Even with the light, he couldn't see their color, but they were dark. Her cheekbones were wide and set high; the lamp on the mantle above her head brought them out white, diminished the mouth, which Lucy held gravely still for him, and darkened the neck. A streak of light ran down both sides of the part in her hair; the hair itself, falling straight on either side of her face, and hanging almost to her waist, squared up the thin shoulders. Henry could see the shapes of the bones in her arms, although she wore a long-sleeved sweater.

Henry thought she looked like an Indian girl sitting on the floor. Lucy sat cross-legged, without a stir, but there was a look of motion, potential motion, in the easy angle of the leg, the curve of the foot. Henry was as still as she, except for his arm, which stroked and stroked at the canvas. To Lucy, Henry's sleeve, which was all she could see, seemed part of the drape behind him, and it flapped softly against the arm as though a summer wind had caught it up.

Lucy filled the hearth, and Henry enclosed her lightly, a darkness outlined with a suggestion of brick. He set her on a dusting of whitest black, the least gray that he could see. It might have been brick, concrete, the ground outside. She looked as though she might rise at any time and walk away.

It was only a sketch, and Henry was finished by the time Lucy said, "My feet are falling asleep, I need to move." He added a few lines while she stamped on the floor. "You don't really want to see this, do you?" He started to cover it with an old shirt that lay beside him. "Yes, I do. Come on, Henry, let me see it. It's for me, isn't it?" Henry smiled as she flung the shirt aside and bent over the sketch.

"It looks like my mother?"

"No, it's you. It looks like you."

Lucy's expression was doubtful, and she turned it around to a better light for her. Her eyes began to smile.

"I thought it was going to resemble your mother, too, at first, but it's like you, Lucy. It's really like you."