

## **L,U,C,I,E.**

**Nadine Gordimer**

My name's Lucie—no, not with a 'y'. I've been correcting that all my life, ever since my name was no longer vocals I heard and responded to like a little domestic animal (here, ' puss, puss) and I learnt to draw these tones and half-tones as a series of outlines: L,U,C,I,E. This insistence has nothing to do with identity. The so-called search for identity bores me. I know who I am. You know well enough who you are: every ridge in a toe-nail, every thought you keep private, every opinion you express is your form of life and your responsibility. I correct the spelling because I'm a lawyer and I'm accustomed to precision in language; in legal documents the displacement of a comma can change the intention expressed in a sentence and lead to new litigation. It's a habit, my pedantry; as a matter of fact, in this instance simply perpetuates another orthographic inaccuracy:

I'm named for my father's Italian grandmother, and the correct Italian form of the name is Lucia. This had no significance for me until I saw her name on her tomb: LUCIE.

I've just been on holiday in Italy with my father. My mother died a few months ago; it was one of those journeys taken after the death of a wife when the male who has survived sees the daughter as the clone woman who, taken out of present time and place to the past and another country. will protect him from the proximity of death and restore him to the domain of life. (I only hope my father has understood that this was one-off, temporary a gift from me.) I let him believe it was the other way round: he was restoring something to me by taking me to the village where, for him, I had my origin. He spent the first five years of his life dumped by poor parents in the care of that grand mother, and although he then emigrated to Africa with them and never returned, his attachment to her seems never to have been replaced. By his mother, or anyone else; long after, hers was the name he gave to his daughter.

He has been to Europe so many times—with my mother, almost every year.

'Why haven't you come here before?' I asked him. We were sitting in a sloping meadow on what used to be the family farm of his grandmother and her maiden sisters. The old farmhouse where he spent the years the Jesuits believe definitive had been sold, renovated with the pink and green terrace tiles, curly-cue iron railings and urns of red geraniums favoured by successful artisans from the new industrial development that had come up close to the village. The house was behind us; we could forget it, he could forget its

usurpation. A mulberry tree shaded the meadow like a straw hat. As the sun moved, so did the cast of its brim. He didn't answer; a sudden volley of shooting did—stuttering back and forth from the hills in cracking echoes through the peace where my question drifted with the evaporating moisture of grass.

The army had a shooting range up there hidden in the chest nut forests, that was all; like a passing plane nicking the fabric of perfect silence, the shots brought all that shatters continuity in life, the violence of emotions, the trajectories of demands and contests of will. My mother wanted to go to art galleries and theatres in great European cities, he was gratified to be invited to speak at conferences in Hong Kong and Toronto, there were wars and the private wars of cartels and, for all I know, love affairs—all that kept him away. He held this self hidden from me, as parents do in order to retain what they consider a suitable image before their children. Now he wanted to let me into his life, to confirm it, as if I had been a familiar all along.

We stayed in the only albergo in the village and ate our meals in a dark bar beneath the mounted heads of stag and mountain goats. The mother of the proprietor was brought to see my father, whom she claimed to remember as a small child. She sniffled, of course, recollecting the three sisters who were the last of a family who had been part of the village so long that—that what? My father was translating for me, but hesitantly, not much is left of his Italian. So long that his grandmother's mother had bred silkworms, feeding them on mulberry leaves from her own trees, and spinning silk as part of the home industry which existed in the region before silk from the Orient took away the market. The church square where he vividly remembered playing was still there and the nuns still ran an infant school where he thought he might have been enrolled for a few months. Perhaps he was unhappy at the school and so now could not picture himself entering that blue door, before us where we sat on a bench beside the church. The energy of roaring motorcycles carrying young workers in brilliantly studded and sequined wind breakers to the footwear and automobile parts factories ripped his voice away as he told me of the games drawn with a stick in the dust, the cold bliss of kicking snow about, and the hot flat bread sprinkled with oil and salt the children would eat as a morning snack. Somewhere buried in him was a blue-pearl, translucent light of candles that distorted 'like water' he said, some figures that were not real people. In the church, whose bells rang the hours tremulously from hill to hill, there were only the scratched tracings of effaced murals; he thought the image must have come from some great event in his babyhood, probably the local saint's day visit to a shrine in a neighbouring town.

We drove there and entered the chapels along the sides of a huge airport-concourse of a basilica—my mother was not a Catholic and this analogy comes to me naturally out of my experience only of secular spaces.

There were cruel and mournful oil paintings behind the liquid gout of votive candlelight; he dropped some coins in the box provided but did not take a candle, I don't know whether the dingy representation of the present snuffed out his radiant image or whether his image transformed it for him. We had strong coffee and cakes named for the shrine, in an arcade of delicious-smelling cafés opposite. He had not tasted those cakes for fifty-eight years, since Lucie bought them as a treat; we had found the right context for the candles that had kept alight inside him all that time. The cafés were filled with voluble old men, arguing and gesticulating with evident pleasure. They were darkly unshaven and wore snappy hats. I said: 'If you'd stayed, you'd be one of them' and I didn't know whether I'd meant it maliciously or because I was beguiled by the breath of vanilla and coffee into the fascination of those who have a past to discover.

At night he drank grappa in the bar with the proprietor and picked up what he could of the arguments of village cronies and young bloods over the merits of football teams, while the TV babbled on as an ignored attraction. These grandchildren of the patriarchs blew in on a splendid gust created by the sudden arrest of speed as they cut the engines of their motorcycles. They disarrayed themselves, flourishing aside tinsel-enamelled or purple-luminous helmets and shaking out haloes of stiff curls and falls of blond-streaked locks. They teased the old men, who seemed to tolerate this indulgently, grinningly, as a nostalgic resurrection of their own, if different, wild days.

No women came to the bar. Up in my room each night, I leant out of my window before bed; I didn't know how long I stayed like that, glitteringly bathed in the vast mist that drowned the entire valley between the window and the dark rope of the Alps' foothills from which it was suspended, until the church clock—a gong struck—sent waves layering through the mist that I had the impression I could see undulating silvery, but which I was feeling, instead, reverberating through my rib-cage. There was nothing to see, nothing. Yet there was the tingling perception, neither aural nor visual, that overwhelms in the swoon before an anaesthetic whips away consciousness. The night before we went to the cemetery, I was quite drunk with it. The reflection of the moon seeped through the endless insubstantial surface, silence inundated this place he had brought me to; the village existed out there no more than it had ever done for me when I had never sat in its square, never eaten under the glass eyes of timid beasts killed in its chestnut forests and mountains, or sat in the shade of its surviving mulberry tree.

We had four days. On our last afternoon, he said 'Let's walk up to the old cemetery.' My mother was cremated—so there was no question of returning painfully to the kind of scene where we had parted with her; still, I should have thought in his mood death was too close to him for him to have found it easy to approach any of its territory. But it seemed this was just one

of the directions we hadn't yet taken on the walks where he had shown me what he believed belonged to me, given in naming me.

We wandered up to this landmark as we had to others. He took a wrong turning into a lane where there were plaster gnomes and a miniature windmill on a terrace, and canaries sang for their caged lives, piercingly as cicadas. But he retraced our steps and found the right cartographical signals of memory. There was a palatial iron gateway surmounted by a cross, and beyond walls powdery with saltpetre and patched with moss, the black forefingers of cypress trees pointed. Inside: a vacuum, no breath, flowers in green water, withered.

I had never seen a cemetery like that; tombs, yes, and elaborate tableaux of angels over grave-stones—but here, in addition to a maze of these there were shelves and shelves of stone-faced compartments along the inner side of the walls, each with its plaque.

Were the dead stored, filed away?

'When there's no room left for graves, it's usual in this country. Or maybe it's just cheaper.' But he was looking for some thing.

'They're all here' he said. We stepped carefully on gravelled alleys between tombstones and there they were, uncles and aunts and sons and daughters, cousins who had not survived infancy and other collaterals who had lived almost a century, lived through the collapse of the silkworm industry, the departures of their grown children to find an unknown called a better life in other countries, lived on through foreign occupation during a war and through the coming of the footwear and automobile parts factories—all looking out from photographs framed under convex glass and fixed to their tombstones. No face was old, or sick, or worn. Whenever it was they had died, here they consorted in the aspect they had had when young or vigorously mature.

There were many Albertos and Giovannis and Marias and Clementinas, but the names most honoured by being passed on were Carlo and Lucia, apparently those of the first progenitors to be recorded. Five or six Lucias, from a child in ringlets to fat matrons inclining their heads towards their husbands, many of whom were buried beside them; and then we came to—he came to—her grave. Her sisters were on either side of her. I couldn't read the rest of the inscription, but LUCIE was incised into the ice-smooth black marble. I leant to look. Go on, he said, giving me the example of bracing his foot on the block that covered her. Under her oval bubble of glass the woman was composed and smooth-haired, with the pupil-less gaze of black eyes, the slightly distended nostrils and straight mouth with indented corners of strong will, and the long neck, emphasized by tear-drop ear rings, of Italian beauties.

Her eyebrows were too thick; if she had belonged to another generation she would have plucked them and spoiled her looks. He put his arm on my shoulder. ‘There’s a resemblance.’ I shrugged it off with his hand. If your name is on your tombstone, it’s definitive, it’s not some casual misspelling. Why wasn’t she Lucia, like the others?

‘I don’t really know—only what I was told by my father, and he didn’t say much. . . parents in those days. . . the sisters kept their mouths shut, I suppose, and in any case he was away working at the docks in Nice from the age of eighteen. . . Apparently she had also gone to work in France when she was very young—the family was poor, no opportunity here. She was a maid in an hotel, and there’s something about her having had a love affair with a Frenchman who used the French version of her name... and so she kept it, even when she married my grandfather.’

While he was talking a dust-breeze had come up, sweeping its broom among the graves, stirring something that made me tighten my nostrils. The smell of slimy water in the vases of shrivelled flowers and the curious stagnant atmosphere of a walled and crowded space where no living person breathed— what I had taken in when we entered the place was strengthened by some sort of sweetness. With his left foot intimately weighted against her grave, the way a child leans against the knee of a loved adult, he was still talking: ‘There’s the other version—it comes from her mother, that it was her mother who was a maid in Nice and my grandmother was her illegitimate child.’ I was looking at the foot in the pump-soled running shoe, one of the pair he had kitted himself out with at the market in Cuneo on our way to the village. ‘She brought the baby home, and all that remained of the affair was the spelling of the name.’ Dust blew into my eyes, the cloying sweetness caught in my throat and coated my tongue. I wanted to spit.’.. . what the maiden sisters thought of that, how she held out against them? God knows... I don’t remember any man in the house, I would have remembered..

The sweetness was sickly, growing like some thick liquor loading the air. We both inhaled it, it showed in the controlled grimace that wrinkled round his eyes and mouth and I felt the same reaction pulling at my own face muscles. But he went on talking, between pauses; in them we neither of us said anything about the smell, the smell, the smell like that of a chicken gone bad at the back of a refrigerator, a rat poisoned behind a wainscot, a run-over dog swollen at a roadside, the stench, stench of rotting flesh, and all the perfumes of the living body, the clean salty tears and saliva, the thrilling fluids of love-making, the scent of warm hair, turned putrid. Unbearable fermentation of the sweetness of life. It couldn’t have been her. It could not have been coming to him from her, she had been dead so long, but he stayed there with his foot on her stone as if he had to show me that there was no stink in our noses, as if he had to convince me that it wasn’t her legacy.

We left saunteringly ignoring the gusts of foulness that pressed against us, each secretly taking only shallow breaths in revulsion from the past. At the gate we met a woman in the backless slippers and flowered overall local women wore everywhere except to go to church. She saw on our faces what was expressed in hers, but hers was mixed with some sort of apologetic shame and distress. She spoke to him and he said something reassuring, using his hands and shaking his head. She repeated what she had told him and began to enlarge on it; I stood by, holding my breath as long as I could. We had some difficulty in getting away from her, out beyond the walls where we could stride and breathe.

‘A young man was killed on his motorbike last week.’

‘What was there to say?’

‘I didn’t see a new grave.’

‘No—he’s in one of the shelves—that’s why... She says it takes some time, in there.’

So it wasn’t the secrets of the rotting past, Lucie’s secrets, it was the secret of the present, always present; the present was just as much there, in that walled place of the dead, as it was where the young bloods, like that one, tossed down their bright helmets in the bar, raced towards death, like that one, scattering admiring children in the church square.

Now when I write my name, that is what I understand by it.