

Excerpt from *Missing Lucile* by Suzanne Berne

Last year my brother sent me a tiny card he found by chance at the bottom of a drawer in his house. Inside a miniature envelope, with a pretend stamp drawn in red crayon on the top left-hand corner, and addressed “to Mother,” is a little folded piece of lined paper on which a note has been written laboriously in pencil.

It reads:

dear Mother.

Yesterday I got a new Book I am reading good in It I got A in French The garden is awfully pretty.

Can we go to the circus next week. We had David over for supper last night. We had ham and Beans — For desert we had Straw Berries.

Love From Henry



That this note was preserved when every other artifact of my father’s early childhood (school reports, drawings, quizzes) was swept away, suggests to me that Lucile herself had treasured it and perhaps tucked it into the corner of her mirror or in a drawer of her bedside table, a place that indicated its value. A keepsake. A reminder of the little boy downstairs, dreaming of elephants and learning French verbs. The note is undated, but my father wrote it himself, in perfectly legible handwriting. He is in school at Cincinnati Country Day, along with his brother and a pack of cousins. It’s spring 1932, probably late May, when the garden is “pretty” and strawberries are in season. He can read “good.” He turned six in January. He is finishing the first grade, and his mother has just come home from the hospital, where she had an operation. And so he writes her a note, because she is upstairs resting and he’s been told to be quiet.

I took this card with me on a spring visit to Charlotte, just as the tulip poplars were coming into leaf, and with the flourish of a defense attorney producing a final exculpatory piece of

evidence, handed it to my father after lunch while he sat in his red armchair. He had been telling me, again, that his mother never cared for him. As I cleared away his plate of egg salad, he took a sip of iced tea, adjusted his glasses and peered at the little card in his hand. He took another sip of iced tea. At last he said querulously, “So I wrote this?”

I came back in from the kitchen to assure him he had. Wiping my hands on a dishtowel and taking a seat on the sofa, I pointed out that this was a note written by a child who knew what mattered to his mother, namely that he was doing well in school and that her garden looked pretty. He also believed she cared about what mattered to him. Her good opinion, his cousin David, strawberries. She was a mother who would want to know what he ate for dinner, a full report down to “desert.” A mother who could be applied to for favors — a trip to the circus, for instance — and who might well grant them. A mother who received notes and kept them. A mother who had to have smiled when she got this one. Smiling myself, I got up and pointed to the signature: Love From Henry.

Ergo: a mother who was not lost, even though she had died.

“Oh,” said my father vaguely.

He was looking out the window over my head. I had the impression he had not been listening very hard. The afternoon must be later than I’d thought; light was draining out of the room, or perhaps it was a passing thundercloud. As I sat back down on the edge of the sofa, clutching the dishtowel and watching my father watch the budding trees outside the darkening window, it suddenly occurred to me that he might be having as much trouble giving up the idea of losing his mother as I was with giving up the idea that I could restore her.