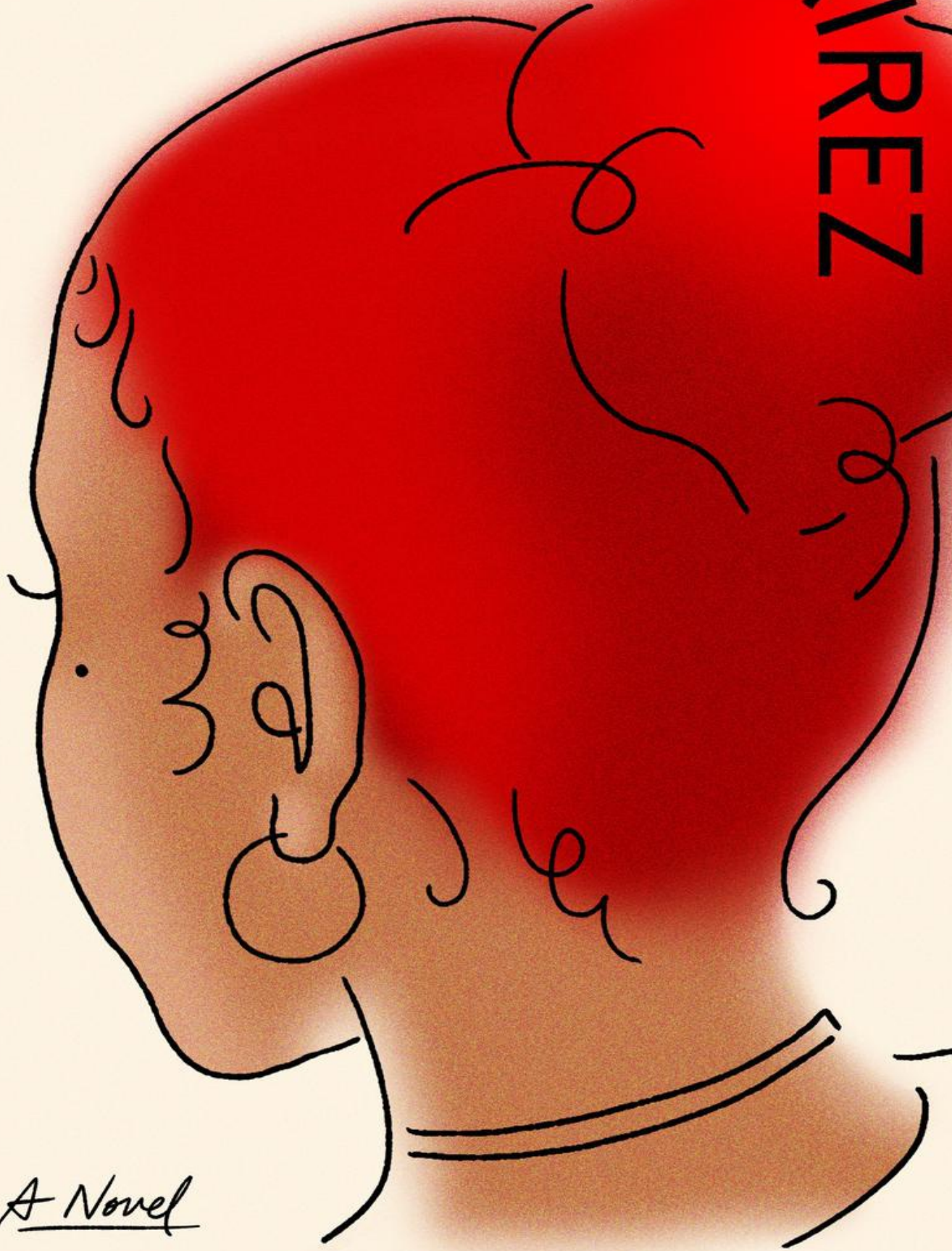


WHAT HAPPENED

to

RUTHY RAMÍREZ



A Novel

CLAIRE JIMÉNEZ

**WHAT
HAPPENED
TO
RUTHY RAMIREZ**

CLAIRE JIMÉNEZ



GRAND
CENTRAL

New York Boston

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women of Staten Island orbit around absence. When thirteen year old middle child Ruthy disappeared after

track practice without a trace, it left the family scarred and scrambling. One night, twelve years later, oldest

sister Jessica spots a woman on her TV screen in Catfight, a raunchy reality show. She rushes to tell her

younger sister, Nina: This woman's hair is dyed red, and she calls herself Ruby, but the beauty mark under

her left eye is instantly recognizable. Could it be Ruthy, after all this time? The years since Ruthy's

disappearance haven't been easy on the Ramirez family. It's 2008, and their mother, Dolores, still struggles

with the loss, Jessica juggles a newborn baby with her hospital job, and Nina, after four successful years at

college, has returned home to medical school rejections and is forced to work in the mall folding tiny

bedazzled thongs at the lingerie store. After seeing maybe Ruthy on their screen, Jessica and Nina hatch a

plan to drive to where the show is filmed in search of their long lost sister. When Dolores catches wind of

their scheme, she insists on joining, along with her pot-stirring holy roller best friend, Irene. What follows is

a family road trip and reckoning that will force the Ramirez women to finally face the past and look toward a

future-with or without Ruthy in it. What Happened to Ruthy Ramirez is a vivid family portrait, in all its

shattered reality, exploring the familial bonds between women and cycles of generational violence,

colonialism, race, and silence, replete with snark, resentment, tenderness, and, of course, love"-- Provided by

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—*Julia de Burgos, “Poema para mi muerte”*

What shall I be called when all remains of me
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—*Julia de Burgos, “Poem for my death”*

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If you drew a map of our family history, you might start it off with my dad, young, fat, and handsome, eighteen-year-old Eddie Ramirez, plotting to get with my moms, who was dark-skinned, small and freckled, long black curly hair. Freshly turned seventeen. Her name is Dolores. And you can probably start it off in Brooklyn. Canarsie. Draw a bump underneath my mother's wedding dress—that's Jessica. Then shortly after, in 1981, you can make Jessica a separate person, angry and red, pale-skinned like my dad, screaming in my mother's arms. Two years later draw Ruthy in pencil, lightly, because you're going to need to erase her in a couple of minutes. Now, draw the Verrazano, the water, the Island, the dump. Draw my proud family, Puerto Rican and loud, driving over the bridge and a little pink town house in West Brighton. I'm the one born in 1986, in Staten Island. They named me Nina. Make me look cute. The five of us seem normal for a while, up until Ruthy turns thirteen and disappears. Now you can rub her body away from the page. Draw my mother sixty-two pounds later. Give her diabetes. Kill my dad. Cut a hole in the middle of the timeline. Eliminate the canvas. Destroy any type of logic. There is no such thing now as a map.

Call that black hole, its negative space, the incredible disappearance of Ruthy Ramirez.

Chapter 1

Nina

Afterwards, sometimes, as a teenager, I would stand at the bus stop where my sister went missing, concentrating on the deli down the block, the way the sign on its front door would blink the word *Open*. I tell you, I would stand there squinting for so long that sometimes a bus would stop and mistake me for somebody waiting. I tried to picture it, 1996: thirteen-year-old Ruthy standing there outside after track practice, five o'clock, alone, book bag graffitied by Sharpies, her red hair knotted and wrapped into a bun. In my head, I'd play out all the different scenarios—our family, shakily divided across a three-way split-screen mounted on the wall in my brain.

While Ruthy was shivering at the bus stop waiting for the S48, as she always did after track practice, me, Jess, and Ma would have already been at home, the handouts for my fourth-grade homework scattered on top of the table, Ma flicking the last pieces of wet onion clinging to her fingers into a hot pan. That night Jess had taken the phone from the kitchen into the small downstairs bathroom so she could whisper into the receiver in private—some sophomore-year secret that nobody even really cared about anyway; still, she lowered her voice. On the other side of the Island, by the mall, my father, who managed a hardware store, would be in the middle of a shift, helping the receiving crew unload a truck of refrigerators, jamming a finger between the twenty-foot shelving and a hand cart, cursing out the motherfucker who sideswiped him with a shopping cart, “Puñeta.”

The alarm did not sound until seven o'clock, when Ma stood on her toes to pull a stack of dishes out of the cabinet and plate the pollo guisado.

Ruthy should've been home by six.

Six fifteen at the latest.

Suddenly aware of the time, Ma wiped her hands on the back of her tight jeans and blinked, then tilted her head to the side and stared past me, as if she were having some otherworldly vision.

"Nina, where is your sister?" she asked me from the stove.

As if I could answer.

I was still trying to remember how to add two fractions with different denominators. A series of multiplication signs were floating on my handout. The paper was disintegrating where I tried too hard to erase away my mistakes.

I wasn't worried about Ruthy. During Christmas she had single-handedly beat up a boy-cousin thirty pounds heavier for calling her butt-ugly: "Oh, you going to cry? Look who's fucking ugly now," she'd said, while he blubbered on the basement floor and tried to hide his face.

In my fourth-grade mind, Ruthy was invincible. Thirteen-year-old Queen of the Quick Comeback, hoop earrings and Vaseline, Patron Saint of the Fist and the Late-Night Call Home from the Principal. Who in the world could touch her, my sister?

No one.

My mother, now more agitated, stepped quickly to the bathroom and shouted through the door. "Jessica, get off the fucking phone already, God."

Once Ma got her hands on the receiver, she dialed the school, but nobody was picking up. Then she called my father at work and started flipping out in Spanish. It was now approaching seven thirty, and Ruthy wasn't home. No phone call. No nothing. (Though Jess had tied up the line for God knows how long.) "And I'm telling you right now, Eddie. I'm not playing games. If I find her sitting outside, chilling with her little friends..."

But the edge in my mother's voice softened and trailed off, betraying the unmistakable fear that sometimes surfaced at the cash register after her credit card was declined and she'd send me back to return whatever brand-name box of cereal I'd begged her to put in the cart. Ruthy was never late coming home from track practice. Not once that I could remember. After she ran, Ruthy always arrived on time, six p.m. for dinner, hungry and eager to replace whatever energy she'd lost.

It was twenty-eight degrees outside that night.

Ma made me and Jess put on a coat and loaded us into the car to drive out to IS 61. Then she told us to roll down the windows and call out for Ruthy, "Loud, girls, so she can hear you." But our voices only echoed across the street against the brick walls of the empty school building.

"For how long?" I asked, the fourteenth time around the middle school.

"Until I tell you not to," Ma said.

When Ma got tired of circling Castleton, she took Forest Avenue and turned left on Victory Boulevard, drove down that long hill towards the water, where we could see the city's skyline twinkling ahead, the buses gliding past us away from the ferry. The long gray lines of electricity suspended between a stretch of wooden crosses erected along Victory Boulevard like the pictures I'd seen of the Calvary in our Sunday school textbook.

Sometimes it feels like the three of us are still stuck in that car.

Shouting out Ruthy's name into the unanswering dark.

For a straight month the cops rolled up and down the block asking everybody the same questions, whether or not Ruthy had a boyfriend? "Or maybe one of youse saw her after school walking back that night to the house? A skinny-looking girl?"

Five foot one. Long red hair. A beauty mark beneath her left eye.

Look, a picture of Ruthy cheesing on a bus on a seventh-grade trip to Six Flags, probably getting ready to argue about something she said somebody was spitting behind her back. Probably about to roll up her FUBU sweatshirt to show you the place in her belly where she'd pierced herself with a safety pin. Our Ruthy'd been a special kind of pain in the ass. She took more liberties than any of us did; once she even snuck out at night and came home at two in the morning, inspired by a dare and unafraid of the epic ass whupping she would receive from my mother, who sat there in the living room on the couch, waiting in the dark for her return. Even though she was only thirteen, she'd been practicing disappearing since she was twelve.

But people didn't talk about that. Not at the praise and worship service at Our Lady of Hope, where they lit candles afterwards and the pastor chanted, "That Ruthy Ramirez will return to us safely." And certainly not in the Ramirez house, where we'd taped her eighth-grade class photo to the wall above Mom's dresser and surrounded the picture with candles and rosary beads as if she were a small deity.

But I knew.

For years I argued with Jessica about whether Ruthy'd run away or whether somebody had taken her. For me it was clear that Ruthy had simply left. The morning she disappeared, Ma had yelled at her for the fifteenth time for not bothering to properly clean the bottom of the caldero when it was her turn to do the dishes, and Ruthy had shaken her head and muttered underneath her breath, "I can't wait to get out of here."

"Look, even her favorite shirt is missing," I would say. To which Jessica would whisper, "Don't be saying that shit in front of Mom, Nina. You hear me? Because I will kick your ass."

There were no clues in the diary Ruthy left.

Just her bubbly shaped script describing kicking it with her best friend Yesenia, several page-long takedowns of the teachers she hated, and then a couple of moments of infighting with the crew of girls she hung out with at

school. A poem. A few raps that sounded suspiciously like Left Eye's part in "Waterfalls." One brief breakup with Yesenia, in which Ruthy called her "a fake corny bitch," and then numerous passages in which she made fun of me and Jessica. "Poor Nina, she's got no rhythm. It's like the girl, she was adopted." Or: "Jessica needs to stop plucking her eyebrows so thin. It makes her forehead look extra big." There were descriptions of our childhood fights, sometimes lists of rules: if you fall off the bed while wrestling and don't get up, you lose; if you blink in a staring contest (even if it was because you had to sneeze), you lose; if you cry while getting roasted by one of your sisters, then, oh Lord, were you finished! Crying was a mortal sin in the Ramirez house. The ultimate sign of weakness.

In Ruthy's journal, there were no suspicious boyfriends or predatory grown-up men. No kindly male mentors with hidden agendas. Just pages of her logging in how fast she ran that day during track practice or descriptions of the pale green hamburger she forced herself to eat during lunch.

Our father waited at the precinct after work every day for a month, with his puffy leather coat folded in his hands over his lap, not for good news (my father was a pessimist) but to make sure the cops did not forget us.

"They got to know that we're watching. And that people care about her," he'd say, his head bent to the plate as he shoveled rice into his mouth late at night, long after all of us had already eaten.

The cops had suspected him at first. Dad knew they looked at him like he was a piece of shit, until they called his boss who confirmed that he'd been working overtime, a late shift, the night that Ruthy disappeared.

Still, it broke my father's heart.

That somebody could think that about him, and those types of rumors, they don't ever go away.

Our mother, shocked, spent large amounts of time stuck at the kitchen table. And if outside people or one of the extended family became restless or moved around the house to clean or to cook, or if people wanted to take

her out to dinner or to a movie to cheer her up, my moms would tell whatever people, “Why don’t you sit the fuck still?”

“Pues, stay still, then!” people started to say, the church folks especially—who’d always looked down on her for being thirty-two with three daughters, for having the first kid when she was just seventeen—they left my mother alone. Even after the gossip and the heartbreak finally killed my father five years later, these people, they kept on whispering. “Besides, you can only sympathize so long for somebody else’s loss before you run out of encouraging things to say.” So my mother stood still.

For many years. By herself.

So that she blew up like a balloon, eleven different sizes.

And what did I do?

That little fourth grader sitting at the kitchen table with minimal math skills and no rhythm, surrounded by her scattered handouts, squinting through Coke-bottle glasses?

Well! The first fully funded chance I got for Promising Minority Students (first-generation or otherwise), I ran away from home, too. Spent most of college making excuses not to come back for Christmas. Not because I did not love my family or was ashamed, but because it hurt too much to see up close what had happened to us over the years. And sometimes, during those rare holiday visits, the gravity of our situation was so strong it felt like being pulled into a black hole. Summers, I avoided seeing Mom by staying on campus upstate to work as a research assistant for one of my biology professors. And sometimes when Jess called, I didn’t pick up, because I worried that if I did, she would provide some urgent reason for me to find the next bus ticket home. I didn’t go back to New York, not even when Jess had the baby.

Mostly, this strategy worked.

Until I graduated, and Jessica put her foot down. “Cut the shit out, Nina. It’s your turn to take care of Ma now.”

Jessica had done it for years.

Driven Ma to appointments.

Made sure she was taking whatever necessary meds.

Four times a week she went to Ma’s house for dinner, helped her clean the dishes afterwards, and then drove back to her boyfriend’s to sleep...but now she had little baby Julie and a full-time job at the hospital and only five hours to close her eyes at night. “And that’s if I’m lucky,” she said. “I need your help.”

Which was something Jess rarely ever admitted.

“All right, I got you.”

After graduation, I flew back to New York, and at the airport, when the three of us met at baggage claim, for a split second we didn’t recognize each other. I hadn’t seen Jessica or Mom in almost two years. Jessica’s cheeks had grown chipmunkish. Her arms and shoulders had rounded so that she looked like a football player, and dark wrinkles had formed around her neck like a noose. Still, she was prettier than me. Even after a kid. Her eyeliner and mascara crumbled around the lids, reminding me of the teenage Jessica who a decade of boys had worshipped and loved, year after year. An arc of rhinestones dotted her collar, and I could tell that she’d dressed up to meet me at the airport, because her long black hair was still wet.

Mom had changed, too. She’d lost weight since I last saw her, sophomore year, and the flesh on her arms had deflated. And you could tell she was in good spirits because of her makeup; it had that sharp Rocío Jurado eyeliner and dark lid, circa 1972.

“She was sleeping a lot last month, but she’s doing better now. She doesn’t do Catholic church anymore because she says they’re a bunch of fucking phonies. But she’s got a new job at the Pentecostal church teaching parenting classes,” Jessica had told me over the phone as I packed

up my dorm room, throwing out old folders and notes. “When you get here, you gotta get her out of that bed. Keep her moving around.”

At the airport Ma was full of energy, though. “Mamita, look how beautiful you are,” she said. She kept on hugging me, then pulling away to smile and hold my chin up for inspection, then hugging me again.

But in the bathroom mirror at LaGuardia I’d already seen how my thick black curls had frizzed and shrunk in the airless compartment of the plane, how the brown skin on my face had yellowed and turned greenish underneath the eyes: too much caffeine, too much staying up all night, finishing finals, giving birth to ugly research papers, the shape of whose declining arguments reflected that night’s consumption of seventy-five-cent vending machine candy and cigarettes.

Here in the terminal, I felt too aware of the body I had forgotten about while studying late at night. My arms and thighs had grown awkwardly over the last few years from being hunched in front of a computer. And when Jess came in for a hug, I wondered if she could feel the soft slope I’d developed between my shoulders from bending over my textbooks at all hours.

“Looking good, sis,” she said extra loud as she pulled me in.

There in her arms, I realized, to my surprise, that I felt shy. In front of my own sister. My mother.

The baggage carousel beeped and the conveyor belt lurched forward and sighed as it rotated the luggage. “Mamita, which one of these is yours?” my mom asked, looking urgently at the bags tumbling onto the carousel.

“Let me get that, Ma,” Jess said.

But Mom insisted, not only on pulling the bag off the conveyor belt but also on rolling it through the bright terminal all the way to the parking lot, where she had one last surprise hidden in the car. “Just a little something!”

She pulled out a bouquet of sunflowers from the front seat.

Nestled in between the blooms was a stuffed bear with a miniature graduation cap, complete with a tiny yellow tassel.

“And we got you a cake at home, too,” Jess said.

“From Valencia,” my mother whispered, before pinching my cheek.

The bear was holding a little card with my name on it.

“Go ahead,” Ma said. “Open it.”

In the envelope, folded, were three crisp twenty-dollar bills, and I thought to myself, Dear Lord, I am so sorry.

Nowhere in the world could there have been a bigger asshole than me.

In the car I tried to redeem myself. I sat in the front seat with the directions Jessica had copied off Mapquest on a napkin in crayon, while at the same time folding and unfolding a map of Queens, all this while Jessica kept taking a series of wronger turns. Later, over the water, on our way back to the Island, Jessica told stories about the baby’s growing teeth. And I told stories about college, aping my professors’ gestures and verbal tics.

Our mother, she sat quietly in the back.

Chapter 2

Nina

That July, two months after I landed in New York, I got a job selling lingerie at the Staten Island Mall—Jessica’s idea. She was the one who dragged me to the interview at Mariposa’s, because one of her girlfriends worked nights there and said they needed a salesgirl bad; it was swimsuit season. And Mariposa’s had just put out a whole line of bathing suits. “Make sure you call them, Nina,” Jess demanded. “First thing tomorrow.”

I tried to get out of it, but there were not many other options. Despite my best efforts, I hadn’t gotten into med school. And though newly graduated from a top university, I was broke and blessed with the brilliant luck of the 2008 recession; all the newspapers that year were saying the economy hadn’t been this screwed up since 1929. Plus, nobody would hire me because they said none of my skills was actually marketable. And if you’ve got some kid who’s worked five years at Dunkin’ Donuts, and he already knows how to work the register, and you can pay him eight dollars an hour, and he’s not going anywhere, and he’s not going to complain because he never had a degree to begin with, who needs a bio major anyway?

“Plus, we’d have to train you,” they said. “I mean, what have you actually *done*?”

A few weeks into the summer, one bad interview after another, I gave in. “Fine. Okay, I’ll apply to Mariposa’s,” I said.

And Jessica was like, “Don’t act like you’re doing *me* a favor. I *got* a job.” Because Jessica loved to point out that she worked at St. Lucy’s Hospital, even though she was only a nurses’ aide.