“In the Bag”
One Time, One Place, p. 59

Alison Goeller
A heavy set, middle-aged black woman clutches a paper bag in her right hand; her left hand is slightly cocked by her side, as if she has just gestured with it. Her head is tilted to the left as well, her right eye hidden by her straw hat, which is also cocked to the side. She wears a broad smile and her Sunday best, a pleated, cotton shirt waist.

A sense of mystery pervades the photo. What has the woman seen or heard to provoke such a joyous response? What is in the bag that she holds? She stands before a shop...
advertising Old Gold cigarettes. Has she purchased something from the shop that pleases her? “In the bag” is an expression suggesting victory. Perhaps she feels victorious in some way.

One might assume the photographer (Welty) has said something to her subject to provoke such an exuberant expression on her face. Except that is not how Welty worked; instead, she waited for the moment of revelation. As she told an interviewer, “the thing to wait on, to reach there in time for, is the moment in which people reveal themselves. You have to be ready, in yourself; you have to know the moment when you see it” (qd. in Meese 409). This was Welty’s genius. She used this artistic vision, a kind of gentle patience, later on to write her short stories.

“In the Bag” was one of dozens of photos of impoverished black women that Welty shot as a junior journalist for the WPA in the 1930’s. Although she was white and middle-class, she was not met with the hostility that some of her fellow journalists and photographers faced. In fact, Welty said her subjects seemed to trust her in ways that were unusual. “In taking […] these pictures, I was attended, I now know, by an angel—a presence of trust. In particular, the photographs of black persons by a white person may not testify soon again to such intimacy. It is trust that dates the pictures now, more than the vanished years” (Welty 6). It was Welty’s willingness to wait for her subjects to reveal themselves that allowed for this trust, for this intimacy. Her photos in no way exploit or manipulate her subjects. They are imbued with, as Jean Kempf has noted, “untamable power” (34). One sees this clearly in the figure of the woman in “In the Bag.” She has an energy and a strength that transcends her socio-economic position. Welty’s gift was recognizing those human qualities even among the seemingly powerless, just as she did in the characters she created in her stories.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


INDEX

Subjects: Trans’Arts
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