



ELIZABETH  
STROUT

PULITZER PRIZE—WINNING AUTHOR OF  
OLIVE KITTERIDGE AND THE BURGESS BOYS

MY NAME IS  
LUCY BARTON

A NOVEL



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# My Name Is Lucy Barton

*A Novel*

ELIZABETH STROUT



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*My Name Is Lucy Barton* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

Chapter 55

*Dedication*

*Acknowledgments*

*By Elizabeth Strout*

*About the Author*

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There was a time, and it was many years ago now, when I had to stay in a hospital for almost nine weeks. This was in New York City, and at night a view of the Chrysler Building, with its geometrical brilliance of lights, was directly visible from my bed. During the day, the building's beauty receded and gradually it became simply one more large structure against a blue sky, and all the city buildings seemed remote, silent, far away. It was May, and then June, and I remember how I would stand and look out the window at the sidewalk below and watch the young women—my age—in the spring clothes, out on their lunch breaks; I could see their heads moving in conversation, their blouses rippling in the breeze. I thought how when I got out of the hospital I would never again walk down the sidewalk without giving thanks for being one of those people, and for many years I did that—I would remember the view from the hospital window and be glad for the sidewalk I was walking on.

To begin with, it was a simple story: I had gone into the hospital to have my appendix out. After two days they gave me food, but I couldn't keep it down. And then a fever arrived. No one could isolate any bacteria or figure out what had gone wrong. No one ever did. I took fluids through one IV and antibiotics came through another. They were attached to a metal pole on wobbly wheels that I pushed around with me, but I got tired easily. Toward the beginning of July, whatever problem had taken hold of me went away. But until then I was in a very strange state—a literally feverish waiting—and I really agonized. I had a husband and two small daughters at home; I missed my girls terribly and I worried about them so much I was afraid it was making me sicker. When my doctor, to whom I felt a deep attachment—he was a jowly-faced Jewish man who wore such a gentle sadness on his shoulders, whose grandparents and three aunts, I heard him tell a nurse, had been killed in the camps and who had a wife and four grown children here in New York City—this lovely man, I think, felt sorry for me, and saw to it that my girls—they were five and six—could visit me if they had no illnesses. They were brought into my room by a family friend, and I saw how their little faces were dirty, and so was their hair, and I pushed my IV apparatus into the shower with them, but they cried out, "Mommy, you're so skinny!" They were really frightened. They sat with me on the bed while I dried their hair with a towel, and then they drew pictures, but with apprehension, meaning that they did not interrupt themselves every minute by saying, "Mommy, Mommy, do you like this? Mommy, look at the dress of my fairy princess!" They said very little, the younger one especially seemed unable to speak, and when I put my arms around her, I saw her lower lip thrust out and her chin tremble; she was a tiny thing, trying so hard to be brave. When they left I did not look out the window to watch them walk away with my friend who had brought them, and who had no children of her own.

My husband, naturally, was busy running the household and also busy with his job, and he didn't often have a chance to visit me. He had told me when we met that he hated hospitals—his father had died in one when he was fourteen—and I saw now that he meant this. In the first room I had been assigned was an old woman dying next to me; she kept calling out for help—it was striking to me how uncaring the nurses were, as she cried that she was dying. My husband could not stand it—he could not stand visiting me there, is what I mean—and he had me moved to a single room. Our health insurance didn't cover this luxury, and every day was a drain on our savings. I was grateful not to hear that poor woman crying out, but had anyone known the extent of my loneliness I would have been embarrassed. Whenever a nurse came to take my temperature, I tried to get her to stay for a few

minutes, but the nurses were busy, they could not just hang around talking.

About three weeks after I was admitted, I turned my eyes from the window late one afternoon and found my mother sitting in a chair at the foot of my bed. “Mom?” I said.

“Hi, Lucy,” she said. Her voice sounded shy but urgent. She leaned forward and squeezed my foot through the sheet. “Hi, Wizzle,” she said. I had not seen my mother for years, and I kept staring at her. I could not figure out why she looked so different.

“Mom, how did you get here?” I asked.

“Oh, I got on an airplane.” She wiggled her fingers, and I knew that there was too much emotion for us. So I waved back, and lay flat. “I think you’ll be all right,” she added, in the same shy-sounding but urgent voice. “I haven’t had any dreams.”

Her being there, using my pet name, which I had not heard in ages, made me feel warm and liquid-filled, as though all my tension had been a solid thing and now was not. Usually I woke at midnight and dozed fitfully, or stared wide-awake through the window at the lights of the city. But that night I slept without waking, and in the morning my mother was sitting where she had been the day before. “Doesn’t matter,” she said when I asked. “You know I don’t sleep lots.”

The nurses offered to bring her a cot, but she shook her head. Every time a nurse offered to bring her a cot, she shook her head. After a while, the nurses stopped asking. My mother stayed with me five nights, and she never slept but in her chair.

During our first full day together my mother and I talked intermittently; I think neither of us quite knew what to do. She asked me a few questions about my girls, and I answered with my face becoming hot. “They’re amazing,” I said. “Oh, they’re just amazing.” About my husband, my mother asked nothing, even though—he told me this on the telephone—he was the one who had called her and asked her to come be with me, who had paid her airfare, who had offered to pick her up at the airport—my mother, who had never been in an airplane before. In spite of her saying she would take a taxi, in spite of her refusal to see him face-to-face, my husband had still given her guidance and money to get to me. Now, sitting in a chair at the foot of my bed, my mother also said nothing about my father, and so I said nothing about him either. I kept wishing she would say “Your father hopes you get better,” but she did not.

“Was it scary getting a taxi, Mom?”

She hesitated, and I felt that I saw the terror that must have visited her when she stepped off the plane. But she said, “I have a tongue in my head, and I used it.”

After a moment I said, “I’m really glad you’re here.”

She smiled quickly and looked toward the window.

This was the middle of the 1980s, before cellphones, and when the beige telephone next to my bed rang and it was my husband—my mother could tell, I’m sure, by the pitiful way I said “Hi,” as though ready to weep—my mother would quietly rise from her chair and leave the room. I suppose during those times she found food in the cafeteria, or called my father from a pay phone down the hall, since I never saw her eat, and since I assumed my father wondered over her safety—there was no problem as far as I understood it, between them—and after I had spoken to each child, kissing the phone’s mouthpiece a dozen times, then lying back onto the pillow and closing my eyes, my mother would slip back into the room, for when I opened my eyes she would be there.

That first day we spoke of my brother, the eldest of us three siblings, who, unmarried, lived at home with my parents, though he was thirty-six, and of my older sister, who was thirty-four and who lived

ten miles from my parents, with five children and a husband. I asked if my brother had a job. "He has no job," my mother said. "He spends the night with any animal that will be killed the next day." I asked her what she had said, and she repeated what she had said. She added, "He goes into the Pedersons' barn, and he sleeps next to the pigs that will be taken to slaughter." I was surprised to hear this, and I said so, and my mother shrugged.

Then my mother and I talked about the nurses; my mother named them right away: "Cookie," for the skinny one who was crispy in her affect; "Toothache," for the woebegone older one; "Serious Child," for the Indian woman we both liked.

But I was tired, and so my mother started telling me stories of people she had known years before. She talked in a way I didn't remember, as though a pressure of feeling and words and observations had been stuffed down inside her for years, and her voice was breathy and unselfconscious. Sometimes I dozed off, and when I woke I would beg her to talk again. But she said, "Oh, Wizzle-dee, you need your rest."

"I am resting! Please, Mom. Tell me something. Tell me anything. Tell me about Kathie Nicely. I always loved her name."

"Oh yes. Kathie Nicely. Goodness, she came to a bad end."



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We were oddities, our family, even in that tiny rural town of Amgash, Illinois, where there were other homes that were run-down and lacking fresh paint or shutters or gardens, no beauty for the eye to rest upon. These houses were grouped together in what was the town, but our house was not near them. While it is said that children accept their circumstances as normal, both Vicky and I understood that we were different. We were told on the playground by other children, “Your family stinks,” and they’d run off pinching their noses with their fingers; my sister was told by her second-grade teacher—in front of the class—that being poor was no excuse for having dirt behind the ears, no one was too poor to buy a bar of soap. My father worked on farm machinery, though he was often getting fired for disagreeing with the boss, then getting rehired again, I think because he was good at the work and would be needed once more. My mother took in sewing: A hand-painted sign, where our long driveway met the road, announced SEWING AND ALTERATIONS. And though my father, when he said our prayers with us at night, made us thank God that we had enough food, the fact is I was often ravenous, and what we had for supper many nights was molasses on bread. Telling a lie and wasting food were always things to be punished for. Otherwise, on occasion and without warning, my parents—and it was usually my mother and usually in the presence of our father—struck us impulsively and vigorously, as I think some people may have suspected by our splotchy skin and sullen dispositions.

And there was isolation.

We lived in the Sauk Valley Area, where you can go for a long while seeing only one or two houses surrounded by fields, and as I have said, we didn’t have houses near us. We lived with cornfields and fields of soybeans spreading to the horizon; and yet beyond the horizon was the Pedersons’ pig farm. In the middle of the cornfields stood one tree, and its starkness was striking. For many years I thought that tree was my friend; it was my friend. Our home was down a very long dirt road, not far from the Rock River, near some trees that were windbreaks for the cornfields. So we did not have any neighbors nearby. And we did not have a television and we did not have newspapers or magazines or books in the house. The first year of her marriage, my mother had worked at the local library, and apparently—my brother later told me this—loved books. But then the library told my mother the regulations had changed, they could only hire someone with a proper education. My mother never believed them. She stopped reading, and many years went by before she went to a different library in a different town and brought home books again. I mention this because there is the question of how children become aware of what the world is, and how to act in it.

How, for example, do you learn that it is impolite to ask a couple why they have no children? How do you set a table? How do you know if you are chewing with your mouth open if no one has ever told you? How do you even know what you look like if the only mirror in the house is a tiny one high above the kitchen sink, or if you have never heard a living soul say that you are pretty, but rather, as your breasts develop, are told by your mother that you are starting to look like one of the cows in the Pedersons’ barn?

How Vicky managed, to this day I don’t know. We were not as close as you might expect; we were equally friendless and equally scorned, and we eyed each other with the same suspicion with which we eyed the rest of the world. There are times now, and my life has changed so completely, that I think back on the early years and I find myself thinking: It was not that bad. Perhaps it was not. But the

are times, too—unexpected—when walking down a sunny sidewalk, or watching the top of a tree bend in the wind, or seeing a November sky close down over the East River, I am suddenly filled with the knowledge of darkness so deep that a sound might escape from my mouth, and I will step into the nearest clothing store and talk with a stranger about the shape of sweaters newly arrived. This must be the way most of us maneuver through the world, half knowing, half not, visited by memories that cannot possibly be true. But when I see others walking with confidence down the sidewalk, as though they are free completely from terror, I realize I don't know how others are. So much of life seems speculation.

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“The thing about Kathie,” my mother said, “the thing about Kathie was...” My mother leaned forward in her chair and tilted her head with her hand to her chin. Gradually I saw how, in the years since I had last known her, she had gained just enough weight to cause her features to soften; her glasses were no longer black but beige, and the hair beside her face had turned paler, but not gray, so she seemed a slightly larger, fuzzier version of her younger self.

“The thing about Kathie,” I said, “is that she was nice.”

“I don’t know,” my mother said. “I don’t know how nice she was.” We were interrupted by the nurse Cookie, who walked into the room with her clipboard, then held my wrist and took my pulse, gazing into the air, her blue eyes far away. She took my temperature, glanced at the thermometer, wrote something on my chart, and walked out of the room. My mother, who had been watching Cookie, now gazed out the window. “Kathie Nicely always wanted more. I often thought the reason she was friends with me—oh, I don’t know if you could call us friends, really, I just sewed for her and she paid me—but I’ve often thought the reason she would stay and talk—well, she *did* have me over at her place when her troubles arrived—but what I’m trying to say here is that I always thought she *liked* my circumstances being so much lower than her own. She couldn’t envy anything about me. Kathie *always* wanted something she didn’t have. She had those beautiful daughters, but they weren’t enough; she wanted a son. She had that nice house in Hanston, but it wasn’t nice enough, she wanted something closer to a city. What city? That’s how she was.” And then plucking something from her lap, squinting, my mother added in a lower voice: “She was an only child, I think that had something to do with it, how self-centered they can be.”

I felt the cold-hot shock that comes from being struck without warning; my husband was an only child, and my mother had told me long before that such a “condition,” as she put it, could only lead to selfishness in the end.

My mother went on: “Well, she was jealous. Not of *me*, of course. But for example, Kathie wanted to travel. And her husband wasn’t like that. He wanted Kathie to be content and stay at home and then he would live off his salary. He did well, he managed a farm of feed corn, you know. They had a perfect, nice life, anyone would have wanted their life, really. Why, they went to dances at some club! I’ve never been to a dance since high school. Kathie would come to me and get a new dress made just to go to a dance. Sometimes she brought the girls over, such pretty little things and well behaved. I always remember the first time she brought them over. Kathie said to me, ‘May I present the pretty Nice girls.’ And when I started to say, ‘Oh, they’re lovely indeed,’ she said, ‘No—that’s what they’re called at their school, in Hanston, the Pretty Nicely Girls.’ Now, how does that feel, I’ve always wondered. To be known as a Pretty Nicely Girl? Though once,” my mother said, in her urgent voice, “I caught one of them whispering to her sisters something about our place smelling funny—”

“That’s just kids, Mom,” I said. “Kids always think places smell funny.”

My mother took her glasses off, breathed on each lens briskly and cleaned them with the cloth from her skirt. I thought how naked her face looked then; I could not stop staring at her naked-looking face. “And then one day, you know, the times changed. People think everyone went foolish in the sixties but it wasn’t until the seventies, really.” Her glasses returned—her face returned—my mother continued. “Or maybe it took that long for the changes to find their way to our cow patch. But one day Kathie

came to visit, and she was giggly and strange—girlish, you know. You'd gone off by then. To—" My mother raised her arm and wiggled her fingers. She did not say "school." She did not say "college." And so I didn't say those words either. My mother said, "Kathie fancied someone she'd met, that was clear to me, though she didn't come out and say so. I had a vision—a *visitation*, it would be more accurate to say; it came to me as I sat there looking at her. And I saw this, and I thought: Uh-oh. Kathie's in trouble."

"And she was," I said.

"And she was."

Kathie Nicely had fallen in love with the teacher of one of her children—who were all three in high school by this time—and she began to see this man secretly. Then she told her husband that she had to realize herself more fully and she couldn't do it trapped by domestic chains. So she moved out, leaving her husband, her daughters, her house. It wasn't until she called my mother weeping that my mother learned the details. My mother drove to find her. Kathie had rented a small apartment, and she was sitting on a beanbag chair, much skinnier than she used to be, and she confessed to my mother that she had fallen in love, but once she'd moved out of her house the fellow had dropped her. Said he could not continue with what they'd been doing. My mother, having come to this point in the story, raised her eyebrows, as though the puzzlement of this was large but not unpleasant to her. "Anyway, her husband was furious and humiliated and would *not* take her back."

Her husband never took her back. He went for over ten years without even speaking to her. When the oldest girl, Linda, got married straight out of high school, Kathie invited my parents to the wedding, because—my mother surmised—Kathie had no one at the wedding who would speak to her. "That girl got married so quickly," my mother said, speaking rapidly now, "people thought she was pregnant, but no child arrived that *I* ever heard about, and she divorced him a year later, and went on to Beloit, I believe, looking for a rich husband and I think I heard she found one." My mother said that at the wedding Kathie kept flitting around, desperately nervous. "It was a sad thing to see. Of course we didn't know a soul, and it was obvious she'd just about hired us to be there. We sat in the chairs—I remember on one wall of the place, you know, it was The Club, that silly fancy place in Hanston, and they had all these Indian arrowheads under glass, why was that, I wondered, who would care about those arrowheads—and Kathie would try and talk to some person and then come right back to us. Even Linda, gussied up in white—and Kathie had not asked me to make the gown, the girl went out and bought it—even this bride-girl hardly gave her mother the time of day. Kathie's lived in a little house a few miles from her husband, ex-husband now, for almost fifteen years. All alone. The girls stayed loyal to their father. I'm surprised, when I think of it, that Kathie was even *allowed* at the wedding. Anyway, he never had anyone else."

"He should have taken her back," I said, tears in my eyes.

"I suppose his pride was hurt." My mother shrugged.

"Well, he's alone now, and she's alone, and one day they're going to die."

"True," my mother said.

I became distraught that day, over the fate of Kathie Nicely, while my mother sat at the foot of my bed. At least I remember it that way. I know that I told my mother—with a lump in my throat and my eyes stinging—that Kathie's husband should have taken her back. I'm quite sure I said, "He'll be sorry. I'm telling you, he will."

And my mother said, "I suspect she's the one who's sorry."

But maybe that wasn't what my mother said.

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Until I was eleven years old, we lived in a garage. The garage belonged to my great-uncle who lived in the house next door, and in the garage there was only a trickle of cold water from a makeshift sink. Insulation nailed against the wall held a stuffing like pink cotton candy, but it was fiberglass and we could not touch it, we were told. I was puzzled by that, and would stare at it often, such a pretty pink thing that I could not touch; and I was puzzled to think it was called “glass”; odd to think now how much time seemed to take up in my head, the puzzle of that pretty pink and dangerous fiberglass we lived right next to every minute. My sister and I slept on canvas cots that were bunk beds, metal poles holding one on top of the other. My parents slept beneath the one window, which looked out over the expanse of cornfields, and my brother had a cot in the far corner. At night I would listen to the humming noise of the little refrigerator; it would go on and off. Some nights moonlight came through the window, other nights it was very dark. In the winter it was cold enough that often I could not sleep, and sometimes my mother heated water on the burner and poured it into the red rubber hot water bottle and let me sleep with that.

When my great-uncle died, we moved into the house and we had hot water and a flush toilet, though in the winter the house was very cold. Always, I have hated being cold. There are elements that determine paths taken, and we can seldom find them or point to them accurately, but I have sometimes thought how I would stay late at school, where it was warm, just to *be* warm. The janitor, with a silent nod, and such a kind expression on his face, always let me into a classroom where the radiators were still hissing and so I did my homework there. Often I might hear the faint echo in the gym of the cheerleaders practicing, or the bouncing of a basketball, or perhaps in the music room the band would be practicing too, but I remained alone in the classroom, warm, and that was when I learned that work gets done if you simply do it. I could see the logic of my homework assignments in a way I could not if I did my work at home. And when my homework was finished, I read—until I finally had to leave.

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Our elementary school was not big enough to have a library, but there were books in the classroom that we could take home and read. In third grade I read a book that made me want to write a book. The book was about two girls and they had a nice mother, and they went to stay in a different town for the summer, and they were happy girls. In this new town there was a girl named Tilly—Tilly!—who was strange and unattractive because she was dirty and poor, and the girls were not nice to Tilly, but the nice mother made them be good to her. This is what I remember from the book: Tilly.

My teacher saw that I loved reading, and she gave me books, even grown-up books, and I read them. And then later in high school I still read books, when my homework was done, in the warm school. But the books brought me things. This is my point. They made me feel less alone. This is my point. And I thought: I will write and people will not feel so alone! (But it was my secret. Even when I married my husband I didn't tell him right away. I couldn't take myself seriously. Except that I did. I took myself—secretly, secretly—very seriously! I knew I *was* a writer. I didn't know how hard it would be. But no one knows that; and that does not matter.)

Because of the hours I stayed in the warm classroom, because of the reading I did, and because

saw that if you didn't miss a piece of the work the homework made sense—because of these things my grades became perfect. My senior year, the guidance counselor called me to her office and said that a college just outside of Chicago was inviting me to attend with all expenses paid. My parents did not say much about this, probably out of defense for my brother and sister, who had not had perfect, or even particularly good, grades; neither one went on to school.

It was the guidance counselor who drove me to the college on a blistering hot day. Oh, I loved the place immediately, silently, breathlessly! It seemed huge to me, buildings everywhere—the lake absolutely enormous to my eyes—people strolling, moving in and out of classrooms. I was terrified but not as much as I was excited. I learned rapidly to imitate people, to try to have the gaps in my knowledge about popular culture be unnoticed, although it was not easy, that part.

But I remember this: When I came home for Thanksgiving, I could not fall asleep that night, and it was because I was afraid I had dreamed my life at the college. I was afraid that I would wake and find myself once more in this house and I would be in this house forever, and it seemed unbearable to me. My thought: *No*. I kept thinking that for a long time, until I fell asleep.

Near the college, I got a job, and I bought clothes in a thrift shop; it was the mid-seventies, and clothes like that were acceptable even if you were not poor. To my knowledge, no one spoke of how I was dressed, but once, before I met my husband, I fell very much in love with a professor and we had a brief affair. He was an artist and I liked his work, though I understood that I did not understand it, but it was *him* I loved, his harshness, his intelligence, his awareness that certain things had to be forgone if he was to have the life he could have—like children, they were forgone. But I record this now for one purpose alone: He was the only person I remember from my youth as mentioning my clothes, and he mentioned them by comparing me to a woman professor in his department who dressed expensively and was physically large—as I was not. He said, “You have more substance, but Irene has more style.” I said, “But style *is* substance.” I didn't know yet that such a thing was true; I had simply written it down one day in my Shakespeare class because the Shakespeare professor had said it and I thought it sounded true. The artist replied, “In that case, Irene has more substance.” I was slightly embarrassed for him, that he would think of me as having no style, because the clothes I wore were *me*, and if they came from thrift shops and were not ordinary outfits, it did not occur to me that that would mean anything, except to someone rather shallow. And then he mentioned one day, “Do you like this shirt? I got this shirt at Bloomingdale's once when I was in New York. I'm always impressed with that fact whenever I put it on.” And again I felt embarrassed. Because he seemed to think that mattered, and I had thought he was deeper than that, smarter than that; he was an artist! (I loved him very much.) He must have been the first person I remember as wondering about my social class—though at the time I would not have even had words for that—because he would drive me around neighborhoods and say, “Is your house like that?” And the houses he pointed to were never like any house familiar to me, they were not large houses, they just weren't at all like the garage I grew up in which I had told him about, and they were not like my great-uncle's house either. I was not sorry about the fact of that garage—not in the way I think he meant me to be—but he seemed to think I would be sorry. Still, I loved him. He asked what we ate when I was growing up. I did not say, “Mostly molasses on bread.” I did say, “We had baked beans a lot.” And he said, “What did you do after that all hang around and fart?” Then I understood I would never marry him. It's funny how one thing can make you realize something like that. One can be ready to give up the children one always wanted, or one can be ready to withstand remarks about one's past, or one's clothes, but then—a tiny remark and the soul deflates and says: Oh.

I have since been friends with many men and women and they say the same thing: Always the telling detail. ~~What I mean is, this is not just a woman's story. It's what happens to a lot of us, if we are lucky enough to hear that detail and pay attention to it.~~

Looking back, I imagine that I was very odd, that I spoke too loudly, or that I said nothing when things of popular culture were mentioned; I think I responded strangely to ordinary types of humor that were unknown to me. I think I didn't understand the concept of irony at all, and that confused people. When I first met my husband William, I felt—and it was a surprise—that he really did understand something in me. He was the lab assistant to my biology professor my sophomore year and had his own solitary view of the world. My husband was from Massachusetts, and he was the son of a German prisoner of war who had been sent to work the potato fields of Maine. Half starved, like they often were, this man had won the heart of a farmer's wife, and when he returned to Germany after the war, he thought about her and wrote her and told her he was disgusted with Germany and all that she had done. He returned to Maine and ran off with this farmer's wife and they went to Massachusetts where he trained to become a civil engineer. Their marriage, naturally, cost the wife a great deal. My husband had the blond German looks I saw from photos of his father. His father spoke German a great deal when William was growing up; though when William was fourteen, his father died. No letters remain between William's father and mother; whether his father really felt disgust for Germany, I don't know. William believed he did, and so for many years I believed that too.

William, running from the neediness of his widowed mother, went to school in the Midwest, but when I met him he was already eager to get back East as soon as he could. Still, he wanted to meet my parents. This was his idea, that we would go together to Amgash and he would explain to them how we were going to be married and move to New York City, where he had a postdoctoral appointment waiting for him at a university. In truth it had not occurred to me to worry; I had no concept of turning my back on anything. I was in love, and life was moving forward, and that felt natural. We drove past acres of soybeans and corn; it was early June, and the soybeans were on one side, a sharp green lighting up the slighting sloping fields with their beauty, and on the other side was the corn, not yet as high as my knees, a bright green that would darken in the coming weeks, the leaves supple now, the becoming stronger. (O corn of my youth, you were my friend!—running and running between the rows, running as only a child, alone, in summer can run, running to that stark tree that stood in the midst of the cornfield—) In my memory the sky was gray as we drove, and it appeared to rise—not clear, but rise—and it was very beautiful, the sense of it rising and growing lighter, the gray having the slightest touch of blue, the trees full with their green leaves.

I remember my husband saying he had not expected my house to be so small.

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We did not stay with my parents an entire day. My father was wearing his mechanic's coveralls, and he looked at William, and when they shook hands I saw in my father's face great contortions, the kind that frequently preceded what as a child I had called—to myself—the *Thing*, meaning an incident in which my father becoming very anxious and not in control of himself. After that, I think that my father did not look at William again, but I can't be sure. William offered to take my parents and my brother and sister into town to eat dinner at some place of their choice. My face felt as hot as the sun when he said that; we had never once eaten in a restaurant as a family. My father told him, "Your money is no good here," and William looked at me with an expression of confusion and I gave my head a tiny shake; he murmured that we should leave. My mother walked out to where I was standing alone by the car and



said, "Your father has a lot of trouble with German people. You should have told us."

"Told you?"

"You know your father was in the war, and some German men tried to kill him. He's been having terrible time from the moment he saw William."

"I know Daddy was in the war," I said. "But he never talked about any of that."

"There are two kinds of men when it comes to their war experience," my mother said. "One talks it, one doesn't. Your father belongs to the group who doesn't."

"And why is that?"

"Because it wouldn't be decent," my mother said. Adding, "Who in God's name brought you up?"

It was not until many years later, long after, that I learned from my brother how my father, in German town, had come upon two young men who startled him, and my father had shot them in the back, he did not think they were soldiers, they were not dressed like soldiers, but he had shot them and when he kicked one over he saw how young he was. My brother told me that William had seemed to my father an older version of this person, a young man who had come back to taunt him, to take away his daughter. My father had murdered two German boys, and as my father lay dying he told my brother that not a day had gone by when he did not think of them, and feel that he should have taken his own life in exchange. What else happened to my father in the war I do not know, but he was in the Battle of the Bulge and he was at the Hürtgen Forest, and these were two of the worst places to be in the war.

My family did not attend my wedding or acknowledge it, but when my first daughter was born I called my parents from New York, and my mother said she had dreamed it, so she already knew I had a baby girl, but she didn't know the name, and she seemed pleased with the name, Christina. After that I called them on their birthdays, and on holidays, and when my other daughter, Becka, was born. When I spoke politely but always, I felt, with discomfort, and I did not see any of my family until the day my mother showed up at the foot of my bed in the hospital where the Chrysler Building shone outside the window.

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In the dark, I asked my mother quietly if she was awake.

Oh yes, she answered. Quietly. Even though it was only the two of us in this hospital room with the Chrysler Building shining at the window, we still whispered as though someone could be disturbed.

“Why do you think the guy Kathie fell in love with said he couldn’t go ahead with it once she left her husband? Did he get scared?”

After a moment my mother said, “I don’t know. But Kathie told me he’d confessed to her he was homo.”

“Gay?” I sat up and saw her at the foot of my bed. “He told her he was *gay*?”

“I suppose that’s what you call it now. Back then we said ‘homo.’ He said ‘homo.’ Or Kathie said it. I don’t know who said ‘homo.’ But he was one.”

“Mom, oh, Mom, you’re making me laugh,” and I could hear she’d started laughing herself, though she said, “Wizzle, I don’t really know what’s so funny.”

“You are.” Tears of laughter seeped from my eyes. “The story is. That’s a *terrible* story!”

Still laughing—in the same suppressed yet urgent way her talking had been during the day—she said, “I’m not sure what’s funny about leaving your husband for a homo gay person and then finding out, when you think you’re going to have a whole man.”

“Killing me, Mom.” I lay back down.

My mother said, musingly, “I sometimes thought maybe he *wasn’t* gay. That Kathie scared him. Leaving her life behind for him. That maybe he made it up.”

I considered this. “Back then I don’t know if that’s the kind of thing a man would make up about himself.”

“Oh,” said my mother. “Oh, I guess that’s true. I honestly don’t know about Kathie’s fellow. I don’t know if he’s still around or anything about him at all.”

“But did they *do* it?”

“I don’t know,” my mother answered. “How would I know? Do what? Have intercourse? How in the world would I know?”

“They must’ve had intercourse,” I said, because I thought it was funny saying that, and also because I believed it. “You don’t run out on three girls and a husband for a *crush*.”

“Maybe you do.”

“Okay. Maybe you do.” I asked, then, “And Kathie’s husband—Mr. Nicely—he really hasn’t had anyone since?”

“Ex-husband. Divorced her quick as a bunny. Anyway, I don’t believe so. There seems no indication of such a thing. But I suppose you never know.”

Maybe it was the darkness with only the pale crack of light that came through the door, the constellation of the magnificent Chrysler Building right beyond us, that allowed us to speak in ways we never had.

“People,” I said.

“People,” my mother said.

I was so happy. Oh, I was happy speaking with my mother this way!

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In those days—and it was the mid-1980s, as I have said—William and I lived in the West Village, in a small apartment near the river. A walk-up, and it was something, with the two small children and having no laundry facilities in the building, and we also had a dog. I would put the younger child in a carry pack on my back—until she got too big—and walk the dog, bending precariously to pick up her mess in a plastic bag, as the signs told one to do: CLEAN UP AFTER YOUR DOG. Always calling out to my older girl to wait for me, not to step off the sidewalk. *Wait, wait!*

I had two friends, and I was half in love with one of them, Jeremy. He lived on the top floor of our building and he was almost, but not quite, the age of my father. He had come originally from France, from the aristocracy, and he gave that all up to be in America, starting as a young man. “Everyone different wanted to be in New York back then,” he told me. “It was the place to come to. I guess it still is.” Jeremy had decided in the middle of his life to become a psychoanalyst, and when I met him he still had a few patients, but he would not talk to me about what that was like. He had an office across from the New School, and three times a week he went there. I would pass him on the street, and the sight of him—tall, thin, dark-haired, wearing a dark suit, and his soulful face—always made my heart rise. “Jeremy!” I would say, and he would smile and lift his hat in a way that was courtly and old-fashioned and European—this is how I saw it.

His apartment I had seen only once, and this was when I got locked out and had to wait for the superintendent to show up. Jeremy found me on the front stoop with the dog and both children, and I was frantic, and he had me come in. The children were immediately quiet and very well behaved once we got inside his place, as though they knew no children were ever there, and in fact I had never seen children going into Jeremy’s apartment. Only a man or two, or sometimes a woman. The apartment was clean and spare: A stalk of purple iris was in a glass vase against a white wall, and there was art on the walls that made me understand then how far apart he and I were. I say this because I didn’t understand the art; they were dark and oblong pieces, almost-abstract-but-not-quite constructions, and I understood only that they were symptoms of a sophisticated world I could never understand. Jeremy was uncomfortable having my family in his place, I could sense that, but he was an exquisite gentleman, and this was why I loved him so.

—

Three things about Jeremy:

I was standing one day on the front stoop, and as he came out of the building I said, “Jeremy, sometimes when I stand here, I can’t believe I’m really in New York City. I stand here and think, ‘Whoever would have guessed? Me! I’m living in the City of New York!’”

And a look went across his face—so fast, so involuntary—that was a look of real distaste. I had not yet learned the depth of disgust city people feel for the truly provincial.

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The second thing about Jeremy: I had my first story published right after I moved to New York, and then it was a while, and my second story was published. On the steps one day, Chrissie told this

Jeremy. "Mommy got a story in a magazine!" He turned to look at me; he looked at me deeply; I had to look away. "No, no," I said. "Just a silly little really small literary magazine." He said, "So—you're a writer. You're an artist. I work with artists, I know. I guess I've always known that about you."

I shook my head. I thought of the artist from college, his knowledge of himself, his ability to forgive children.

Jeremy sat down beside me on the stoop. "Artists are different from other people."

"No. They're not." My face flushed. I had always been different; I did not want to be any more different!

"But they are." He tapped my knee. "You must be ruthless, Lucy."

Chrissie jumped up and down. "It's a sad story," she said. "I can't read yet—I can read *some* words—but it's a sad story."

"May I read it?" Jeremy asked me this.

I said no.

I told him I could not bear it if he didn't like it. He nodded and said, "Okay, I won't ask again. But Lucy," he said, "you talk to me a lot, and I can't imagine reading anything by you that I wouldn't like."

I remember clearly that he said "ruthless." He did not seem ruthless, and I did not think I was. I could be ruthless. I loved him; he was gentle.

He told me to be ruthless.

—

One more thing about Jeremy: The AIDS epidemic was new. Men walked the streets, bony and gaunt, and you could tell they were sick with this sudden, almost biblical-seeming plague. And one day sitting on the stoop with Jeremy, I said something that surprised me. I said, after two such men had just walked slowly by, "I know it's terrible of me, but I'm almost jealous of them. Because they have each other, they're tied together in a real community." And he looked at me then, and with real kindness on his face, and I see now that he recognized what I did not: that in spite of my plenitude, I was lonely. Lonely was the first flavor I had tasted in my life, and it was always there, hidden inside the crevices of my mouth, reminding me. He saw this that day, I think. And he was kind. "Yes" is all he said. He could easily have said, "Are you crazy, they're dying!" But he did not say that, because I understood that loneliness about me. This is what I want to think. This is what I think.

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In one of those clothing shops New York is famous for, one of those places privately owned and so of like the art galleries of Chelsea, I found a woman who turned out to affect me a great deal, who may—in ways I don't understand fully—be the reason I have written this. It was many years ago now, my girls would have been perhaps eleven and twelve. In any event, I saw this woman in this clothing store and I felt certain she hadn't seen me. She had the sort of ditzy look you seldom see on women anymore, and she was attractive with it, wore it very well, and she was I would have said almost fifty years old. She was attractive in many ways, stylish, and her hair—ash is the color we used to call it—was well done, by which I mean I understood the color to have come not from a bottle but from the hands of a person trained to work in a salon. And yet it was her face I was drawn to. Her face, which I watched in the mirror while I tried on a black jacket, and finally I said, “Do you think this works?” Her look was surprised, as though she had no idea someone would ask her opinion on clothes. “Oh, it doesn't work here, I'm sorry,” she said. I told her I understood that, I only wanted her opinion. I told her I liked the way she dressed.

“Oh, okay. You *do*? Well, thanks, wow. Yeah, okay. Oh yeah”—she must have seen me tugging on the lapels of the jacket I had asked her about—“it's nice, that *is* nice, are you going to wear it with the skirt?” We discussed the skirt, and whether or not I owned a longer skirt, just in case, as she put it, “might want to wear heels, you know, a little pickup.”

She was as beautiful as her face, I thought, and I loved New York for this gift of endless encounters. Perhaps I saw the sadness in her too. This is what I felt when I got home and her face went through my mind; it would be something you didn't know you saw at the time, as she smiled a great deal and it made her face sparkle. She had the look of a woman who had men still falling in love with her.

I said, “What do you do?”

“For a job?”

“Yes,” I said. “You just look like you do something interesting. Are you an actress?” I put the jacket back on the hanger; I did not have the money to buy such a thing.

Oh no, no, she said, and then she said, and I swear I saw her color rise, “I'm just a writer. That's all.” As though she might as well confess, because—I sensed—she had been caught before. Or perhaps being “just a writer” was all she thought it was. I asked her what she wrote, and then her color clearly did rise, and she waved her hand and said, “Oh, you know, books, fiction, things like that, it doesn't matter, really.”

I had to ask her name, and again I had the sense I'd caused her great embarrassment—she said on one breath: “Sarah Payne”—and I didn't want to cause her embarrassment, so I thanked her for her advice, and she seemed to relax and we spoke of where to get the best shoes—she was wearing a pair of black patent leather high heels—and that made her happy, I thought, and then we parted, each of us saying how nice it had been to meet the other.

—

At home in our apartment—we had moved by then to Brooklyn Heights—and as the children ran about, shouting where was the hair dryer, or the blouse that had been in the laundry?, I looked through

our bookshelves and I saw that Sarah Payne looked only a little bit like her jacket photo; I had read her books. ~~And then I remembered being at a party with a man who knew her. He spoke of her work saying that she was a good writer, but that she could not stop herself from a “softness of compassion that revolted him, that, he felt, weakened her work. Still, I liked her books. I like writers who try to tell you something truthful. I also liked her work because she had grown up on a run-down apple orchard in a small town in New Hampshire, and she wrote about the rural parts of that state, she wrote about people who worked hard and suffered and also had good things happen to them. And then I realized that even in her books, she was not telling *exactly* the truth, she was always staying away from something. Why, she could barely say her name! And I felt I understood that too.~~

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In the hospital that next morning—now so many years ago—I told my mother I was worried about her not sleeping, and she said that I shouldn't worry about her not sleeping, that she had learned to take catnaps all of her life. And then, once more, there began that slight rush of words, the compression of feeling that seemed to push up through her as she started, that morning, to suddenly speak of her childhood, how she had taken catnaps throughout her childhood too. "You learn to, when you don't feel safe," she said. "You can always take a catnap sitting up."

I know very little about my mother's childhood. In a way, I think this is not unusual—to know little of our parents' childhoods. I mean, in a *specific* way. There is now a large interest in ancestry, and that means names and places and photos and court records, but how do we find out what the daily fabric of a life was? I mean, when the time comes that we care. The Puritanism of my ancestors has not made use of conversation as a source of pleasure, the way I have seen other cultures do. But that morning in the hospital my mother seemed pleased enough to speak of the summers she had gone to live on the farm—she *had* spoken of that in the past. For whatever reasons, my mother spent most of her childhood summers on the farm owned by her Aunt Celia, a woman I have remembered only as a thin, pale person, and whom I, as well as my brother and sister, called "Aunt Seal"—at least in my head I always thought that was who she was, "Aunt Seal," and there was confusion about that, because children are literal thinkers and I had no idea why she would be named after an animal from the ocean I had never seen. She was married to Uncle Roy, who was, as far as I knew, a very nice man. My mother's cousin Harriet was their only child, and her name was the one that came up periodically throughout my youth.

"I was thinking," my mother said, in her soft, rushed voice, "how one morning, oh, we must have been little, maybe I was five, and Harriet three, I was thinking how we decided to help Aunt Celia take the deadheads off the lemon lilies that grew by the barn. But of course Harriet was just a little thing and she thought the big buds were the dead parts to take off, and there she was, snapping them right off, when Aunt Celia came out."

"Was Aunt Seal mad?" I asked.

"No, I don't remember that. But I was," my mother said. "I'd tried to tell her what was a bud and what wasn't. Stupid child."

"I never knew Harriet was stupid, you never said she was stupid."

"Well, maybe she wasn't. She probably wasn't. But she was afraid of everything, she was so afraid of lightning. She would go hide under the bed and whimper," my mother said. "I never understood her. And so frightened of snakes. Such a silly girl, really."

"Mom. *Please* don't say that word again. Please." Already I was trying to sit up and raise my feet. Even now I always feel the need to get my feet up where I can see them, should I hear that word.

"Say what word again? 'Snakes'?"

"Mom."

"For heaven's sake, I don't— All right. All right." She waved a hand, and gave a little shrug as she turned to look out the window. "You've often reminded me of Harriet," she said. "That silly fear of yours. And your ability to feel sorry for any Tom, Dick, or Harry that came along."



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