

december

A L I T E R A R Y L E G A C Y S I N C E 1 9 5 8

volume 31.1

SPRING/SUMMER 2020

lucy ferriss

LUCKY WOMAN

WHEN THE CALL COMES, SARAH'S LINING UP FOR THE PLANE. Like everything else in Australia, the Sydney airport feels disconcertingly familiar. Only the naïve-seeming spellings — organisation, cheque — set it apart from airports in the States. Whole families, their vacations at a close, push ahead in the line. Seventeen hours to San Francisco. She taps the bottom left square on the iPhone screen, the green image of a handset, a drawing no one will recognize in twenty years.

"I don't have any money," says her son, Christopher. His half-choked voice in her ear, closer than any other sound in the airport. "I don't have anywhere to sleep."

Sarah checks her watch: 10:30 a.m. Friday, in Sydney, means 4:30 p.m. Thursday in Las Vegas. He's slept through his checkout; he's been kicked out of the hotel. "Where are your friends?" she asks. She inches forward in the line. The ticket attendant looks Filipino. Parting her generous lips, she smiles at everyone who passes through, as if delights await them at the tantalizing end of the jetway.

"Whatever," he says. His favorite word. "Just get me home," he says.

"Christopher, I'm boarding a plane. I sent you my itinerary. You have no money at all?"

"I think I said that."

Sarah hitches her shoulder to keep her heavy bag from slipping. An altercation's arisen: someone's ticket doesn't match the passport. Passport, right. She fishes in her bag. Across an ocean and a couple of mountain ranges, her son is trudging the streets of Las Vegas, pulling his own bag. The streets there are hot, unlike Sydney in August. Cars cruise aimlessly in wide lanes, the casinos not yet aflame with neon. She's anticipated this call, right down to the day it would come through, almost the hour. Christopher's impeccable timing: wait to call until the stakes are highest.

"Mom?"

"Chris, let me call you back. I've got to get to a seat."

He clicks off, no goodbye. The couple with the passport problem has stepped

aside where an unsmiling man deals with them. The scanner makes its approving bleep and Sarah moves to the jetway, the metallic air seeping through the sliders, the line crawling.

They talked about Chris yesterday. Oliver voted for leaving him on the street. Sarah, he said, would bring the snarling boy home and cuddle him. You don't know that, Sarah said, and Oliver said he hadn't been wrong yet, which threatened to start a fight. So Sarah let it go — she's good at this now, tucking Christopher into a little pouch, attaching him to the imagined leg of a carrier pigeon, and watching all her fear for him waft over the horizon — in order for them to have a lovely last night in Sydney before she flew back. This trip, after all, was Oliver's. Oliver has professional obligations left to fulfill, a paper on chaos theory this afternoon and a panel tomorrow. They ate at Aria, overlooking the Opera House. Afterward they walked by the botanical gardens, scanning the skies for fruit bats. The rain had lifted, and the bridge shone like a string of pearls across the bay. His hand slipped easily from her shoulder down her side, rounding her waist and hips, and Sarah felt lucky.

With relief she finds her seat, 37D, the aisle abutting the middle section, no chance of stretching out but at least 37E contains a slender woman. Sarah hoists her bag into the overhead compartment and pulls out her cell.

"You want me to fly you to Boston," she says when she's reached Chris again. Astonishing, the clear reception. Here she sits in a metal sheath on a tarmac ten thousand miles from where he shuffles the streets.

"Well, I have no money." Chris's voice tightens. In general, it's either tight as a drawn bow or flat and soggy as a mud puddle.

"The house is locked up, Chris. Oliver and I won't be back for another two weeks. I don't see what you're going to do there —"

"Sleep."

"— and I don't feel like rewarding what I think was a foolish choice. But I will do something else. I'm arriving in San Francisco in seventeen hours. Find somewhere to sleep. I will put you on a flight to San Fran. I will house you there for a week. You can go to the wedding if you like. But you have to promise me that you will see a psychiatrist. And that if I agree with whatever the psychiatrist recommends, you will do it."

She spills this out in one breath, so he won't interrupt. She doesn't know when she came up with the plan. She wasn't thinking about it last night, or during the two

weeks with Oliver on Australia's Gold Coast, or even as she trundled down the jetway. Her plan was to soldier on, after she landed, to her nephew's pre-nuptials dinner; to unpack her one summer dress and attend the wedding tomorrow; to spend a couple days lolling around Marin County with Molly. But the offer has created itself and she can't snatch it back.

"Fuck you," says Christopher, and hangs up.

Sarah smiles at her seatmate. "I guess we're settling in for the long haul." The woman nods pleasantly and returns to her iPad. Good. No more words. She's tired of words, of all the things they do and all the things they refuse to do. She's ready to be suspended in space and pulled toward the rising sun.

There have been a half-dozen rescue missions. From the soccer academy in Florida where he got ejected for playing poker in the wee hours and then had his pouch of twenties — \$2,000, by his reckoning — stolen by some rich loser. From the fourth-tier college in Virginia where he was recruited to the soccer team and failed out when he stopped attending classes. From the emerging-adult program in Oregon where he refused his share of kitchen duty. From the house in Hartford where the woman on the first floor OD'd in the living room and her boyfriend announced he was sending over a bunch of Latino gangsters to beat Chris up.

This time, one day after Sarah and Oliver had landed in Sydney, Chris won \$5,000 online and left his newly rented room in Middletown to take off for Las Vegas and the World Series of Poker. Driving up the east coast of Australia, Sarah had calculated the costs. A hundred a night for the room, a hundred a day — the way those guys eat — for food. At least four tournament buy-ins of \$500 each, though maybe he got someone to stake him for the big draw. Still, she estimated twelve days before he ran out of money. Bang on.

She dislikes knowing her son so well. When it comes to moments like this — or when it comes to remembering the ebullient boy — she hates knowing any of it. NOS, she sometimes refers to Chris, pronouncing it "nose." Bipolar disorder NOS, personality disorder NOS, depression NOS. *Not otherwise specified. No options or solutions.* When she thinks too hard about it, she thinks of Tessie, and she cannot be thinking about Tessie all the time or she's no good to anyone.

The plane offers a full menu of movie options. She picks Hollywood weepies, plots she knows Oliver wouldn't like. When she shuts the light, her body starts

missing him. She feels diffuse to herself, not completely there. In four days, he'll join her in San Francisco. Then she'll be solid again.

The old habit: she's booked at the Motel 6 in Walnut Creek, just down from the dinner restaurant and a half-hour from the wedding site. Only with Oliver has she stayed at hotels boasting more than two stars. The sun scorches the parking lot. Clicking shut the rental car, she makes her way to the reception cubbyhole and then across the lot to her room, a beige box with the whoosh of the freeway filtering through the noisy air conditioner. She dips the transparent washcloth into hot water at the washbasin and presses it to the back of her neck.

My phone will ring now, she thinks, and it does. Christopher says, "I slept in a park last night."

"And I slept on a plane. What do you want to do?"

"You're not going to fly me home."

"Nope."

"So get me on a plane to San Francisco."

The washcloth has cooled; she tosses it into the basin, sits on the lumpy bed. She's won . . . something. She reminds Christopher that he'll need to see the shrink — where is she going to find a shrink? — and to cooperate with whatever the shrink suggests. She books him a flight arriving the next day at two. "Where am I supposed to sleep tonight?" he says.

With all your friends, she wants to say. All your good buddies who suckered you into Vegas. Instead she says, looking at her phone, "There's a Minitel by the Vegas airport. It's 59 bucks a night. I'll transfer a hundred to your account."

"I haven't eaten."

"You've got 41 bucks extra."

How much has he cost her? Not the sports, the colleges, just the mental health. Oliver added it up in May — a hundred grand, more than she grosses in a year. You can't keep doing this. Two years ago she took out a second mortgage on the house. Now Oliver wants to pay it off. *You do too much for me*, she said when he paid for the dinner — last night? Two nights ago? Time floats — in Sydney. *I am the luckiest man in the world*, Oliver said.

Luck and its two-faced ways. The groom's dinner is at Sombrero's, a high-ceilinged Mexican place with a smorgasboard of tacos and various moles. "I can't believe," her sister Cindy says when Sarah finds her, "you just flew in from Australia."

"Nonstop." Sarah kisses everyone on the cheek — her brother Jason, her handsome nephew, his pretty bride. A festive occasion. "Listen," she says to Cindy, "there's a wrinkle."

Conferring with Grant, her red-cheeked husband, Cindy procures an extra spot for Christopher at the wedding. *How wonderful, what a nice surprise.* They do their best to disguise the doubt that flickers across their candlelit faces. Toasts ensue, lame jokes and hearty laughter. The wedding party all sound far away. What time is it for Oliver, on the other side of the spinning globe, where the moon waxes on the left and the constellations don't add up? She told him it didn't matter, his not coming to the wedding — he's met this nephew only once — but now she wishes she had him at her side. She's been to too many of these things alone, felt the sidelong glances, braced for the inevitable questions.

Oliver has no kids. Maybe that allowed them to pass almost half the ten days in Australia without worry over Christopher snaking beneath her skin. Now, jet-lagged in Sombrero's, she remembers following Oliver out of Carnarvon Gorge, a 22-kilometer hike deep into a cleft of the Australian rainforest. Her knees had gone to jelly. The sweat had dried to salt between her breasts. The Australian winter sun was dipping beyond the cliff. The day had brimmed over with kookaburras, kangaroos, moss gardens, canyons sliced so thin you walked with palms pressed against each cliff. The ancient emojis within the sandstone caves — boomerangs, vulvas, echidnas — and Oliver's arm across her shoulder. "You okay here?" he asked her. His musk rose to her senses.

"Tessie," she said.

"Maybe we shouldn't have come."

"No, I'm glad we're here. She'd have loved this. She wanted to go around the world, hiking. She told me."

Oliver pulled her close. He'd never known Tessie. He'd met Sarah at a conference, five years after the accident, three years after her divorce. Now she had the momentary, mad idea of saying they shouldn't leave the gorge; they should buy

one of the ranch houses near the rim and take up sheep farming. But they piled into the rental car and made their way out of the forest, across the high plain and down to the sea.

Next day, wedding day, she drives to the airport and settles into the cell phone lot, her wrinkle-free dress for the wedding hanging from the hook by the back window. Her iPhone informs her Chris's flight has been delayed. The wedding kicks off at 4:30. Gordie, her brother's oldest, has promised to bring a fresh shirt if Chris wants to come to the ceremony. Everyone's being kind; no one's badgering her. Last night she slept like a shell at the bottom of the ocean.

She calls Molly. "Poor baby," Molly says in her feathery voice. "Bring him here. He can sleep on the floor."

"I don't think so, Molls. I value our friendship. I'm not inflicting him on you."

Molly's a pediatrician; she gave Tessie and Chris all their immunizations and saw Chris through croup. Then she met a carpenter on Match.com, moved back to her roots on the West Coast, ditched the carpenter, and stayed. She's flown East exactly once, for Tessie's funeral.

When Tessie was little, she called Molly *Dockah Mommy*, as if the only thing that distinguished her from Sarah was her title. With Christopher it was different. He never trusted doctors, not even Dr. Molly.

It's Sunday, Molly reminds her. She'll put in some calls, but Sarah might check her insurance. "And you know, Sarah, a one-time visit —"

"I didn't know what else to do with him, Molls. I couldn't scrape him off the sidewalk again without making him commit to something."

"Maybe he needs to talk about Tessie."

"He has, Molly." She feels her throat tighten. Tessie told Molly things she never told Sarah. The year she died, she'd gone to Molly for birth control. "He's talked and talked and talked and talked and talked."

"Okay." A pause on the phone. The beep of a microwave. Then Molly says, "It's not your job to keep him alive."

At 3:00, after glancing around the half-empty lot, Sarah quickly peels off her T-shirt and struggles into the dress and shoes. Using the visor mirror, she swipes her face with travel-tattered makeup. She steps out of the car to smooth the dress. The

fog's cleared off; a range of mountains rears up in the east. Their peaks are so much higher, so much more jagged than the slopes of Mount Greylock. You'd expect accidents, in such forbidding territory. Wasn't it up here somewhere that that guy fell into a crevasse and had to cut off his own arm? Never hike alone. Of course, Tessie hadn't been hiking alone. She'd been with Christopher. Christopher at thirteen, manic probably but they called it high jinks. Christopher on the

rim of the cliff, dancing a jig, terrifying his sister, and so she went to pull him back, to yank him to safety. Before they lost her in the trauma ward, she managed to say it wasn't Chris's fault. "Lifesaving, Mom," she said, her face drained of its color, her eyes bleary, blood pasting her hair to her ruined head. "Reach or throw. Don't go."

She didn't, Sarah reminds herself. She hasn't. Blamed her son.

When Chris calls, she swings over to the terminal, where a lanky, soft-looking young man blinks in the bright sun. The tense lift to his upper lip twists him away from handsome. His skin has a cheesy sheen; his unwashed hair curls over his ears. When she last saw him, on the East Coast, sloth and pizza had given him a belly, but that's gone. He slings his bag into the back and stands stiff for her hug.

Edging the car away from the curb, Sarah tries to smile. "I'm glad you're here."

"Flight was late."

"You'll need to come with me to the wedding."

"Whatever."

"It's just that it's too late to drop you —"

"I want to go to the wedding."

She glances over at him. This is a surprise. "That's great, honey," she says. "Your cousins will be so glad."

"I don't have anything to wear."

"Gordie's bringing a shirt. He thought in case you wanted to come and didn't have one."

Before they lost her
in the trauma ward,
she managed to say it
wasn't Chris's fault.
"Lifesaving, Mom," she
said, her face drained of
its color, her eyes bleary,
blood pasting her hair to
her ruined head.

"I don't have a tie."

"He's probably bringing that too. You probably don't need a tie. You've got a clean pair of jeans —"

"I don't have good shoes."

She glances at his feet. The seam by the small toe has burst. The leather's gray, streaked with mud. "Nobody'll care about your shoes, honey."

"I don't have a belt."

"We'll call Gordie. Here. I'll call Gordie." Stopping at a light, she pulls out her phone. It's a sign of the problem, this delight she takes in the idea that Chris will join the family. "Gordie," she says when her nephew's picked up. "Do you have an extra belt, too? Maybe a tie?" She knows better than to ask about shoes. Chris's feet are three sizes bigger than his cousin's. Sure, Gordie says, no problem. "There," she says, tucking away the phone. "All set."

"I still don't have shoes."

"You don't need shoes."

"We should stop at a store."

They're on the freeway. The digital clock on the dashboard reads 3:45. "We don't have time, Chris. Everyone will just be happy to see you. Don't worry about it."

"Maybe I won't go."

"Suit yourself. But I have to go, and I have no time to take you elsewhere."

Always, the many-threaded web of blame. She could have bought him clothes and shoes that morning, instead of catching up on sleep. Could have reminded him that he'd turned down the invitation when it came because he didn't give a shit about his cousins. Could have listened to Oliver and let him hit bottom in Las Vegas; eventually, he might have begged for real help. Or she could have bought him a ticket to Boston and not have his seething presence next to her, right now.

At last, the wedding: behind the arbored, hillside home of the bride's parents, whose names Sarah can't remember. Chris slips through the side door with his bag; the shirt, per Gordie's text, hangs in the small bathroom. Sarah takes a deep breath and joins the rest on the patio. A woman from the night before touches her arm. "They're just starting," she says. Her breath smells of licorice.

Afterwards, the usual reception at the usual country club, Chris seated at a table far from Sarah's and the newlyweds making the rounds. Sarah begins to think it will be

all right. "So you're Cindy's sister!" shouts a woman across the table. She introduces herself as Paige, the bride's father's cousin. "You came all the way from Australia!"

"I was on my way home," Sarah answers. "I don't live in Australia."

"My mistake!" Moving around the table, Paige pulls up a chair. "So you were there with your handsome son?" Her eyebrows lift as she scans the room.

There was a time when Sarah had been proud of Chris. It gave way to the time when she felt ashamed of him. She's past both of those now. "With my partner," she says. "He's a mathematician, he had a conference. I tagged along."

"So your son —"

"Was in Vegas, losing all his money."

"Oh, my dear. I know. I *know*." Paige puts her hand, which shows far more age than her face, on Sarah's. "We had one like that," she says. "Alex dropped out of, I don't know, three colleges. Got into drugs, the whole works. Knocked up a girlfriend, and we paid for the abortion. I don't have to tell you."

Sarah sips her white wine. Chris has never been on drugs. His last girlfriend flitted through his life four years ago. No point saying these things. She lets Paige carry on.

"... and then at thirty, he finished his associates' degree, and what do you know, he got in on the ground floor of this new company, home medical devices, and it turns out he has an absolute *genius* for selling things to nursing homes. That's where he met his wife, Laura, she's a nurse, and they've got twins. Can you imagine? They bought a place last year just twenty miles from us in Sacramento. I talk to him every day. He is such a sweetie now. I thank my stars."

The wine leaves an acidic streak down Sarah's throat. Thank God the woman isn't near her purse, or she'd be pulling out her phone now, showing Sarah photographs of her loving, successful son. *Your child is not my child*, she wants to tell people who give her these stories as if they are balm and not salt. Aloud she says, "You must be very proud of him."

"I'm a lucky woman," Paige says.

It's a relief that Paige has forgotten what started her talking about Alex. They let their gazes drift over the archipelago of white-clothed tables, the generations who've come to celebrate the joining of lives.

After dinner, Sarah finds herself drinking gin and tonics at the bar. She pictures Oliver at the conference hotel in Sydney, drinking Australian Shiraz, pulling out his

gold Cross ballpoint to mark up a paper napkin with an equation. Across from him sit a couple of earnest mathematicians, their Adam's apples sharp in their long necks, and perhaps the woman from New Zealand who invited Oliver in the first place — a pretty, nervous 40-something with large breasts and small feet, a wonder she doesn't tip over. Maybe Oliver will sleep with her. He's tremendously attractive to women over 35. Not because of his looks; he's balded patchily, carries a paunch, speaks in a strained tenor that draws air from the top half of his lungs. But he listens intently, his blue eyes enlarged by his rimless glasses, and he gestures sexily with his flat-palmed hands. Sarah's own affair with him began as a very adult one-night stand after a party for faculty and staff — she runs the Major Gifts program — and has kept pace with Christopher's rage. Once, early on, Christopher greeted Oliver at the door by flinging a Mountain Dew Code Red at his shirt. Kids *like* me, Oliver used to insist. Why he stays, Sarah can't say. She hopes not out of pity. If that's what it is, he'll take the nervous New Zealander to bed, and God bless them both.

The third time Cindy's husband, Grant, swans over to pull Sarah onto the dance floor, she succumbs. The band's playing Motown for the oldsters. From the side, nursing a beer, his cousin's shirt untucked, Christopher watches. Sly and the Family Stone, Aretha, The Temptations. When she looks up between numbers, he's unstuck himself from the wall and is moving his hips in rhythm, on his face a crooked smile, like the ochre stencil of a cave drawing.

"How's your guy?" Grant asks as they start "When a Man Loves a Woman," a slow number. He doesn't pull her close, but they execute a languid swing.

"Oliver's giving his paper today," she says, "in Sydney."

"You two ever getting married?"

"We've talked about it."

"We like him," Grant says. He glances over at Cindy, dancing with Jason. "Your sister's afraid you'll lose him," he says, "like, you know."

He doesn't finish the sentence. Sarah frowns. As soon as the song ends, she gets away. From the bar she regards her sister and her husband, now hopping excitedly to "Get on Up." Does Cindy think she loses men, the way other people lose keys? Or the way she lost Tessie, letting her stray too far down the path with Christopher, of all people? Eleven years, it's been. Guilt throttles you.

Only if you let it, Oliver always tells her. As if he knows.

Paige trots up, sweating. "You," she shouts at Sarah over the mounting noise, "are a player!"

"A what?"

"A player! Your sister" — Paige nods toward the dance floor — "is *not*!"

Sarah smiles. The woman is drunk. She feels a tap on her shoulder.

"Christopher," she says.

"C'mon." Her son takes her hand to lead her back onto the floor. The band starts on "Do You Love Me?" and Sarah lets herself shimmy and turn, her tall sweaty son moving with her, music thumping.

He asked me to dance, she hears herself saying to Oliver. We danced. ❷