

a novel

Lucy

by

#1 NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

the Sea

Elizabeth

Strout

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

LUCY BY THE SEA

A Novel



ELIZABETH STROUT



RANDOM HOUSE

NEW YORK

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

Copyright © 2022 by Elizabeth Strout

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

RANDOM HOUSE and the HOUSE colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Strout, Elizabeth, author.

Title: *Lucy by the sea* : a novel / Elizabeth Strout.

Description: New York : Random House, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022023167 (print) | LCCN 2022023168 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593446065 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593446072 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3569.T736 L83 2022 (print) | LCC PS3569.T736 (ebook) | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20220518

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022023167>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022023168>

Ebook ISBN 9780593446072

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Dana Leigh Blanchette, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Anna Kochman and Greg Mollica

Cover art: Jeremy Miranda

ep_prh_6.0_140874742_c0_r0

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Book One

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Book Two

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Dedication

Acknowledgments

By Elizabeth Strout

About the Author

BOOK ONE



One

i

Like many others, I did not see it coming.

—

But William is a scientist, and he saw it coming; he saw it sooner than I did, is what I mean.



William is my first husband; we were married for twenty years and we have been divorced for about that long as well. We are friendly, I would see him intermittently; we both were living in New York City, where we came when we first married. But because my (second) husband had died and his (third) wife had left him, I had seen him more this past year.

—

About the time his third wife left him, William found out that he had a half-sister in Maine; he found it out on an ancestry website. He had always thought he was an only child, so this was a tremendous surprise for him, and he asked me to go up to Maine for two days with him to find her, and

we did, but the woman—her name is Lois Bubar— Well, I met her but she did not want to meet William, and this made him feel very terrible. Also, on that trip to Maine we found out things about William's mother that absolutely dismayed him. They dismayed me as well.

His mother had come from unbelievable poverty, it turned out, even worse than the circumstances I had come from.

The point is that two months after our little trip to Maine, William asked me to go to Grand Cayman with him, which is where we had gone with his mother, Catherine, many, many years before, and when our girls were small we would go there with them and with her too. The day he came over to my apartment to ask me to go with him to Grand Cayman, he had shaved off his huge mustache and also cut his full white hair very short—and only later did I realize this must have been a result of Lois Bubar's not wanting to see him plus everything he had learned about his mother. He was seventy-one years old then, but he, kind of, I think, must have been plunged into some sort of midlife crisis, or older man crisis, with the loss of his much younger wife moving out and taking their ten-year-old daughter, and then his half-sister's not wanting to see him and his finding out that his mother had not been who he'd thought she had been.

So I did that: I went to Grand Cayman with him for three days in early October.

And it was odd, but nice. We had separate rooms, and we were kind to each other. William seemed more reticent than usual, and it was strange for me to see him without his mustache. But there were times when he threw his head

back and really laughed. There was a politeness to us that was consistent; so it was a little strange, but nice.

—

But when we got back to New York, I missed him. And I missed David, my second husband, who had died.

I *really* missed them both, David especially. My apartment was so quiet!



I am a novelist and I had a book coming out that fall, and so after our trip to Grand Cayman I had a great deal of traveling to do around the country and I did it; this was in late October. I was also scheduled to go to Italy and Germany in the beginning of March, but in early December—it was kind of odd—I just decided I was not going to go to those places. I never cancel book tours and the publishers were not happy, but I was not going to go. As March approached someone said, “Good thing you didn’t go to Italy, they’re having that virus.” And that’s when I noticed it. I think that was the first time. I did not really think about it ever coming to New York.

But William did.

ii

It turned out that the first week in March, William had called our daughters, Chrissy and Becka, and asked—begged—they to leave the city; they both lived in Brooklyn. “And don’t tell your mother yet, but please do this. I will deal with her.” And so they hadn’t told me. Which is interesting because I feel that I am close to our girls, I would have said closer to them than William is. But they listened to him. Chrissy’s husband, Michael, who is in

finance, really listened, and he and Chrissy made arrangements to go to Connecticut to stay in the house of Michael's parents—his parents were in Florida, so Chrissy and Michael could stay in their house—but Becka balked, saying that her husband did not want to leave the city. Both girls said they wanted me to know what was going on, and their father said to them, “I’ll take care of your mother, I promise, but get out of the city now.”

A week later William called me and told me this, and I was not frightened but I was confused. “They’re actually leaving?” I said, meaning Chrissy and Michael, and William said yes. “Everyone is going to be working from home soon,” he said, and again I did not really understand it. He added, “Michael has asthma, so he should be especially careful.”

I said, “He doesn’t have terrible asthma, though,” and William paused and then said, “Okay, Lucy.”

Then he told me that his old friend Jerry had the virus and was on a ventilator. Jerry’s wife also had the virus, but she was at home. “Oh Pill, I’m so sorry!” I said, yet I still did not get it, the importance of what was happening.

It’s odd how the mind does not take in anything until it can.

The next day William called and said that Jerry had died. “Lucy, let me get you out of this city. You’re not young, and you’re scrawny and you never exercise. You’re at risk. So let me pick you up and we’ll go.” He added, “Just for a few weeks.”

“But what about Jerry’s funeral?” I asked.

William said, “There will be no funeral, Lucy. We’re in a—a mess.”

“*Where* out of the city?” I asked.

“Out of the city,” he said.

I told him I had appointments, I was supposed to see my accountant, and I was supposed to get my hair done. William said I should call my accountant and get an earlier appointment and to cancel my hair and to be ready to leave with him in two days.

I could not believe that Jerry had died. I mean that sincerely, I could not believe it. I had not seen Jerry in many years, and maybe that was why I was having trouble. But that Jerry had died: I could not get it into my head. He was one of the first people to die of the virus in New York City; I did not know that at the time.

But I got an earlier appointment with my accountant, and also for my hair, and when I went to my accountant’s office I took the small elevator up: It always stops at every floor, he is on the fifteenth floor, and people squeeze in holding their paper coffee cups and then look down at their shoes until they get off, floor by floor. My accountant is a large, burly man, my age exactly, and we have always loved each other; it may sound a little strange, because we do not socialize, but he is one of my favorite people in a way, he has been so deeply kind to me over these many years. When I walked into his office he said “Safe distance,” waving to me, and so I understood then that we would not hug as we always do. He joked about the virus, but I could tell he was nervous about it. When we were through with our meeting he said, “Why don’t you go down the freight elevator, I can show you where it is. You’ll be alone on it.” I was surprised and I said, Oh no, there was no need for that. He waited a moment, and then he said, “Okay. Bye-bye, Lucy B,” blowing me kisses, and I went down in the regular elevator to

the street. “See you at the end of the year,” I said to him; I remember saying that. And then I took the subway downtown to get my hair done.

—

I have never liked the woman who colors my hair—I had adored the first woman who colored it for years, but she moved to California—and the woman who took over, I just never liked her. And I did not like her that day. She was young and had a small child, and a new boyfriend, and I understood that day that she did not like her child, she was cold, and I thought: I am never coming back to you.

I do remember thinking that.

—

When I got home to my building I met a man in the elevator who said he had just gone to the gym on the second floor but the gym was closed. He seemed surprised about this. “Because of the virus,” he said.



William called me that night and said, “Lucy, I’m picking you up tomorrow morning and we’re leaving.”

It was a strange thing; I mean that I was not alarmed but I was still kind of surprised at his insistence. “But where are we going?” I asked.

And he said, “The coast of Maine.”

“*Maine?*” I said. “Are you *kidding?* We’re going back to Maine?”

“I’ll explain,” he said. “Just please get yourself ready.”

I called the girls to tell them what their father had suggested, and they both said “Just for a few weeks, Mom.” Although Becka was not going anywhere. Her husband—his name is Trey, and he is a poet—wanted to stay in Brooklyn, and so she was going to stay with him.

William showed up the next morning; he looked more like he had years ago, his hair was growing out and his mustache was coming back—it had been five months since he had shaved it off—but it was not nearly what it had once been, and he looked a little odd to me. I saw that on the back of his head was a bald spot; his scalp was pink. And, also, he seemed strange. He stood in my apartment with a look of anxiety as though I was not moving fast enough. He sat down on the couch and said, “Lucy, can we please go *now*?” So I tossed a few clothes into my little violet-colored suitcase and I left the dirty dishes from breakfast. The woman who helps clean my apartment, Marie, was coming the next day, and I don’t like to leave dirty dishes for her, but William really wanted to get going. “Take your passport,” he said. I turned and looked at him. “Why in the world would I take my passport?” I asked. And he shrugged and said, “Maybe we’ll go to Canada.” I went and got my passport, and then I picked up my laptop and put it back down. William said, “Take your computer, Lucy.”

But I said, “No, I don’t need it for only a couple of weeks. The iPad will be fine.”

“I think you should take your computer,” he said. But I did not.

William picked up the laptop and took it with him.

We went down in the elevator and I rolled my small suitcase to his car. I was wearing my new spring coat that I had recently bought. It was dark blue and black and the girls had convinced me to get it the last time we were at Bloomingdale’s, a few weeks before.

Here is what I did not know that morning in March: I did not know that I would never see my apartment again. I did not know that one of my friends and a family member would die of this virus. I did not know that my

relationship with my daughters would change in ways I could never have anticipated. I did not know that my entire life would become something new.

These are the things I did not know that morning in March while I was walking to William's car with my little violet-colored rolling suitcase.

V

As we drove out of the city, I looked at the daffodils that were out by the side of my building and the trees blossoming near Gracie Mansion; the sun was streaming down with a gentle warmth, and people were walking along the sidewalk, and I thought: Oh, what a beautiful world, what a beautiful city! We got on the FDR, there was a lot of traffic as usual, and over to the left a group of men were playing basketball on a court surrounded by a chain link fence.

Once we were on the Cross Bronx Expressway, William told me that he had rented a house in a town called Crosby—it was on the coast—and that Bob Burgess, Pam Carlson's ex-husband from years ago, lived there now and had found it for him. Pam Carlson is a woman that William had an affair with on and off for years, it doesn't matter. Anymore, I mean, it doesn't matter. But Pam is still friendly with William, and also with her ex-husband, Bob, and apparently Bob was a lawyer in that town and the woman who owned this house had recently put it on the market: Her husband had died, and she had gone into assisted living and she had asked Bob to manage the property. Bob said we could stay in the house; the rent was not even one quarter of the price of my apartment rent in New York, and William has money anyway.

"For how long?" I asked again.

He hesitated. "Maybe just a few weeks."



What is strange as I look back is how I simply did not know what was happening.



I had been kind of disheartened in the previous months. This is because my husband had died a year earlier; also I am often despondent at the end of a book tour, and this had been made worse because I no longer had David to call from the road. That was the hardest part of the tour for me: not having David to speak to each day.



Recently a writer I know—her name is Elsie Waters and her husband had died right before my husband David had died and so we were especially close because of that—had asked me to dinner and I had told her that I was too tired right then. That’s okay, she had said, as soon as you are rested we will get together!

I always remember that as well.



At one point William stopped to get gas, and when I glanced into the backseat I saw what looked like surgical masks in a clear plastic bag and also a box of plastic gloves. I said, “What are those?”

“Don’t worry about it,” William said.

“But what *are* they?” I asked, and he said, “Don’t worry about it, Lucy.” But he put on a plastic glove to hold the gas nozzle, I did notice that. I thought he was really overreacting to all of this, and I kind of rolled my eyes, but I did not say anything to him about it.



So William and I drove to Maine that day, it was a long sunny drive and I don’t remember that we spoke that much. But William was upset that Becca was staying in the city, in Brooklyn. He said, “I told her I would pay for them to go to a house in Montauk, but they won’t do it.” He added, “Becca will be working from home soon, you’ll see.” Becca is a social worker for the city, and I said I didn’t see how she could possibly work from home, and William just shook his head. Becca’s husband, Trey, teaches poetry—he is an adjunct—at New York University, and I didn’t see how he’d ever be able to work from home either. But I did not say that. In a way, I think it did not feel real; I mean because—oddly—I was not all that concerned.

vi

As we finally got off the highway in Maine and drove toward the town of Crosby, it was suddenly very overcast; I took my sunglasses off and everything looked really brown and bleak, and yet in a way that was interesting: There were many different shades of brown in the grasses that we passed by; there was a quietness to this. Then we drove into the town and there was a big white church at the top of a small hill, and there were brick sidewalks and white clapboard houses, and some brick houses too. You could see that the town was pretty in a certain way, if you care for such things.

I do not.