Lucky Country

By Alison Brown De Moreno (she/her)

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I use the same prompt every time and it is as follows:

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When editing or responding to my dictated text, follow these instructions:
Treat every word I dictate as intentional unless it is clearly a voice-to-text transcription error.
Correct only obvious transcription mistakes (for example: incorrect homophones, missing punctuation, incorrect capitalisation, or words that are clearly the result of speech recognition errors).
Do not paraphrase, summarise, or rewrite my thoughts unless I explicitly ask you to do so.
Do not change my tone, personality, humour, emotion, or level of directness.
Do not remove repetition unless it is clearly an accidental duplication caused by dictation.
Do not reorganise my ideas or alter the order of my thoughts unless I specifically request structural editing.
Do not add information, assumptions, explanations, examples, or opinions that I did not provide.
If a sentence is awkward because it was dictated, make the smallest possible change necessary to improve readability while preserving my original wording and intent.
If something is genuinely unclear, ask for clarification instead of guessing what I meant.
Preserve my natural speaking style. I want the finished text to sound like me, not like an AI assistant.
Unless I explicitly use words such as "rewrite," "rephrase," "polish," "improve," "make it more professional," "make it more concise," or similar, assume I want transcription preservation only, with minimal editing.
When in doubt, follow this principle:
Preserve my words. Preserve my meaning. Preserve my voice.

If required I can provide unedited versions for review.

Trigger Warnings: Childhood neglect and emotional abuse, parentification, homelessness and housing instability, religious trauma and homophobia, ableism and medical gaslighting, serious illness and cancer and non-graphic references to sexual violence.

There once was a little girl who everybody said was lucky. And when I say everybody, I mean everybody who thought they knew something about her, which, as it turned out, were mostly people who only knew what they were allowed to see and didn't know nearly as much as they thought they did.

Now, that little girl came into this world more than two months before anybody was expecting her and she was so small and so early that the grown folks had plenty of reason to worry about whether she intended to stay. But stay she did and before she had learned to walk or speak for herself and before she knew that the world had already begun deciding what sort of person she ought to be, she had gained a reputation for being lucky.

Death had come calling early, but that little girl had only just arrived and she wasn't about to be hurried out.

And that wasn't even the beginning of her good fortune, because before there was a little girl, there was a man who'd taken something that didn't belong to him, and before that a young woman with a promising life. Now that man, he could walk away from what he'd done but that young woman couldn't walk away from what he'd left behind. He left her carrying the consequences of something she had never invited and when the time came to decide what would become of that child, she chose to bring her into the world.

Now, nobody could say that was a small decision and people had opinions. But that decision became a story told so often that the little girl could recite it herself before she was old enough to understand more than that she had been chosen and spared. She was here because somebody had decided she ought to be and that was something she should be grateful for.

And grateful she was expected to remain, because that little girl grew up knowing this, knowing that her mother might have chosen otherwise and that her own existence was something she ought to be grateful for.

Now, there was something curious about this mother. She had chosen to become one, but she wasn't really interested in the thing that came with being one, even her name. The little girl called her by her name the same as anybody else might and the little girl, who had been taught to accept what grown folks told her, never saw much reason to question it. She had a Granny, an Auntie, a Pop Pop and a Grandma, all names that told the world something about the place those people held in her life but not her mother.

And perhaps that would have meant nothing in another home, because there are plenty of mothers who answer to different names and love their children with all their hearts. But this little girl had been taught that having a mother at all, any kind of mother, was the blessing. Still she had been chosen and she had survived and she had a mother even if she did not have a Mommy.

And wasn't she lucky?

The little girl was smart too, which brought her mother a whole lot of admiration. For most of her early years the little girl spent her days in the company of elderly relatives who could barely read. There wasn't much there intended for a child and definitely not the sort of carefully arranged collection of pictures books and toys that people liked to imagine would surround such a clever little girl but there were words left lying around in rooms where the child was left to entertain herself. So she did. She made companions of old newspapers and the funny papers, teaching herself to recognize the words until she read things nobody expected a child her age to understand.

They called her clever, gifted and mature for her age and praised her mother for her parenting and while they were right about the cleverness they didn't seem particularly interested in how she had come to spend so much time figuring things out without anybody helping her. Now wasn't that convenient? The child did the learning, the mother received the praise and nobody looked any deeper.

And when the time came for school her mother sent her to private school and wasn't that a fine thing for a little Black girl growing up in Philadelphia? Her mother was fostering her mind, people said, giving her opportunities other children would never receive. When the time came for her preschool graduation, however, her mother had a karate tournament to attend so the babysitter went and took photographs instead.

The little girl had her education, her mother had her photographs and everybody had another reason to admire the woman who raised such a remarkable child.

And before anybody goes feeling too sorry for that little girl, understand that she wasn't sitting there at graduation wondering why her mother hadn't come. She knew where her mother was. And as far as she was concerned everybody had somewhere to be and where her mother needed to be wasn't where she was. It wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last either. It takes a little growing up before you start asking questions about the things you never thought to question as a child.

But cleverness could only take the little girl so far. She talked too much, moved too much, took people at their word when apparently they had meant something else and asked questions that grown people found charming until they became inconvenient. She could understand complicated ideas and still be bewildered by rules everybody else seemed to know without being told. They called her book smart but with no common sense and she spent a good part of her childhood wondering where this common sense was kept and why nobody would explain how she was supposed to get it.

Because if everybody else had some and she didn't, surely somebody could tell where they were handing it out.

And her body was no more cooperative than her mind. She was walking on her toes and tearing up her shoes. She complained of pains that adults found amusing because her grandmother,

who had arthritis, called it “Old Arthur” and the little girl had taken to announcing that Arthur was bothering her too. And they laughed and laughed at the thought of such a little thing having an old woman’s trouble, never considering that she might be describing exactly what she felt.

Old Arthur meanwhile paid no mind to the laughter. He came when he pleased and stayed as long as he liked and seemed entirely unconcerned that nobody had invited him into a child’s knees. And the child couldn’t understand what was so funny. If Arthur was bothering Granny and her knees hurt just like Granny’s then clearly Arthur was bothering her too.

What else was she supposed to call the man?

Then it was asthma, which was harder to laugh away when breathing became too hard because sometimes her mother had to interrupt her day and come to the school with medicine. And the little girl learned that keeping her alive could be a considerable inconvenience to a woman with other things to do.

But her mother came, didn’t she? There were children whose mothers did not. They were children who went without medicine, without shoes, without somebody willing to even make that much effort.

And when your blessings are measured against someone else’s suffering there’s always somebody worse to remind you how fortunate you ought to feel.

Because if she complained too much there was always a possibility of being sent away to the care of strangers who, according to the stories told, might give her something worth complaining about. So the little girl learned to mind herself, mind her manners, mind her sisters when they came along, and mind that she didn’t ask for more than she had already been given.

The blessings were counted often enough. Food, clothes, shelter, education, mother. The list was long and by the time everybody finished reciting it there was hardly any room left for the little girl to say if something was missing because look at all that she had.

Besides, there was always somebody somewhere having a worse time of it. If you had shoes, somebody was barefoot. If you had food, somebody was hungry. If you had a roof, somebody was sleeping in the street. And if you had a mother who reminded you of all those things, well you had certainly no business complaining.

Funny how a list of other people’s misfortunes never seems to run out.

And wasn’t she lucky?

Now eventually there came a time when the woman decided that Philadelphia was too small a place for all the plans she had made and across the river in New Jersey there was a job and a better life and opportunity just waiting for a woman with good sense to reach out and take it. At least that's how the story was told anyway. By then the mother who didn't want to be a mother had three more children. Another one with the man who took and some years later two more with a new man who gave but could never give enough for a woman who always wanted more. The children were fortunate, everybody said, to have a mother so determined to improve their circumstances. Some children never got to leave the place they were born. Some children never had a mother with ambition.

Well this one certainly had ambition. And the little girl, who was eight going on nine, had no particular objection to ambition. She only wished it didn't require leaving everybody that she knew.

Philadelphia was Granny and Pop-Pop and Grandma and Auntie. It was the people who knew her odd ways and loved her anyway and the faces that she could recognise from a distance and the places that she could always find without being told where to go. It was where her brother lived. And he wasn't just another person in the house, he was that little girl's person. The one she wanted when the world was too much and the one she wanted when the world was wonderful because both sorts are better when you have somebody to tell.

Well her grandfather wanted the boy and her grandmother would've kept the girl but the woman had [a job to take in two little ones that needed tending, so the boys stayed in Philadelphia and the girl was packed off to New Jersey. The little girl was needed, you see. Whether anybody had thought to ask what she needed was another matter altogether.

Because the woman who didn't want to become Mommy made the little girl the mommy.

Wasn't that something?

Now, before you go imagining that the little girl resented those babies you oughta know something about her. She loved those girls from the moment they came home. That little girl loved her baby dolls and she always wanted to be a mother someday and now there were two real babies who needed a Mommy and it seemed that someday was now.

They were her first children. But not in the way a woman who chooses to have children, when she is old enough to understand the bargain of sacrifice required to be a mother. She was a child herself and there were days when she wanted to be nothing more complicated than somebody's little girl. But she loved the twins and she loved them so selfishly that she made herself a promise without ever sitting down to say it out loud that whatever else happened those babies would know that they were wanted. They would never have to look around the room and wonder whether somebody cared because they would have her.

And so she learned how to do their hair while her own went undone. She learned what they liked and what they didn't. How to settle one when the other needed something. How to make a little bit stretch far enough that they might not notice how little they had been in the first place.

And when she eventually earned money of her own there would be clothes to buy and food to bring home and all the small treasures the big sister could afford. The first thought was so often what she might get for those girls that she scarcely noticed it become a habit to think of others first and herself second.

But before there were jobs of her own there was school and when school ended other children stayed for clubs and after-school programs and lingered with their friends and took their sweet time getting home. But that little girl, she hurried because there were twins waiting and somebody had to be there and the woman who had taken the job was not about to let the business of the little girl being a child interfere with the business the little girl had of keeping her household running.

Now sometimes there would be a new outfit or a book or video game for the little girl and the grown people would point to those things and say how well the child was provided for. She had things to play with and books to read and nice clothes. What more could a little girl want?

Well, an afternoon, for one thing. An afternoon that belonged to her with no babies to mind and no clock to race and no reason to feel guilty for wanting to stay a little bit longer with the other children. But there wasn't much room for that sort of wanting so she made herself happy with what she had. She was very good at that. She could be delighted by a book and an hour stolen for her own imagination.

So she could be content with what she had but still want a little bit more and both things were true. Though the grown folks only seemed to have room in their heads for one of them at a time and it was mostly the idea that she had more than enough.

Meanwhile the brother she had left behind remained in Philadelphia and the distance between them grew larger than the miles on the map. They hardly went back, and in the years that passed there was hardly time to visit and the boy, who was once her favourite companion grew so quiet that he stopped speaking. He lost his sister and he lost his voice. And the little girl could not go and get him nor could she argue with a grown woman's arrangements. She also could not make the distance any smaller or the missing less harder.

Still, New Jersey wasn't all loss. They moved once and then again and somewhere along the line in those new streets the little girl began finding familiar faces. There came a new auntie and uncle with two cousins, none of whom needed to share her blood to become hers. Black folks have always been generous with their understanding of family. We collect people. And when someone starts feeding you or doing your hair or worrying over you when you haven't come home, one day you find yourself calling them Auntie without there ever being a discussion. They become another branch on the family tree that was grafted on.

Wasn't she lucky, taken away from the people who knew her and here she was finding people who might come to know her too?

And those new family members brought the woman to a church for a while that seemed like another respectable addition to a better life. Church was where you went to learn how to be

good and the little girl had been practising being good for years and wanted to learn how to be better at it. She could sit still when required, listen carefully, do what she was told and take every word the preacher said with the seriousness of somebody who believed grown people generally meant what they said and said what they meant and followed those rules because they didn't want to end up in hell.

And the preacher had a lot to say about hell.

Oh he knew hell. And who was going there. And what would send them there and how hot it was gonna be when they arrived. And he seemed particularly certain about the fate of people who loved the wrong people. The little girl listened because she was trying to learn how to be good and tucked all those warnings away for future reference.

And wouldn't you know it, the woman found herself rather taken with the preacher and he was just as taken with her. Because for a woman who wanted more than what she had, being the preacher's wife would be amazing. The difficulty was that the preacher already had a wife, which might have been a discouragement to someone less hopeful but the woman was a person of tremendous faith when it came to getting what she wanted. The girl meanwhile was being taught that the smallest forbidden feeling might bring down eternal damnation. It was an interesting church. Very strict about some things but rather accommodating about others.

And then for a time the family even had a house of their own. Now that was something to be celebrated. The woman had a good job, there were people around who had become family and at last there was a house that they could call their own. You could've looked at that house and said the move had been worth it and the little girl might well have agreed with you because she was still a child and a house is an amazing thing to have when you're accustomed to being told how fortunate you are to just have a roof over your head. They finally had something that was theirs.

And then her grandfather died. Now I won't pretend that losing a grandfather was a blessing because there are some things that you cannot put a pretty ribbon on no matter how hard you try. But after his death the brother came back. And the boy who had been left behind was returned and the little girl had her person back with her again. And there was sorrow in that return but there was also happiness. A child can carry both without needing anybody to tell her which ought to weigh more but people have opinions, as they do. They couldn't understand how the silent boy had so much to say and the quiet girl had a smile on her face at a funeral. But they didn't understand that they had been kept apart for years and had missed each other for all that time.

And for a little while there was a house and there were sisters and a brother and there were people who loved them and perhaps the better life had finally found the right address. Only the woman had been making plans of her own. She was giving her time to the church, working for it without pay and giving money to the preacher who, as far as she was concerned, would one day leave his wife and make good on the future she had imagined for them. The mortgage apparently was expected to show a little Christian patience and the bills could wait their turn. A

house may need paying for every month but a dream is more agreeable when nobody sends a reminder in the mail. The bank however was not moved by the strength of her convictions and by the time the woman realised that her dreams were just that, the house was gone.

Now, I want you to picture that little girl for a moment. She knew that if her sisters needed something she must find a way to provide it. She knew that a promise made to a grown person had to be kept and that being responsible was a matter of doing what needed doing even when you would rather be somewhere else. She had learned all of that before she was even old enough to cross the street on her own. Yet here were grown people with their jobs and their church and their grand ideas behaving as though the ordinary business of keeping a roof over your head and paying bills were optional extras.

Well the little girl who had been told many times that she had no common sense started to question if common sense allowed grown people to understand these arrangements. Because she certainly couldn't make any sense of them.

So the family moved again, only this time instead of moving into another house of their own they began moving into other people's kindness.

First the mother of a girl who had become her big sister, who already had a house full of people, somehow found space for five more. Think of that for a moment: you have a woman with children of her own already opening the door and saying there was room. Now not a lot of room mind you but enough and sometimes enough is a very beautiful thing. There were people to talk to and people to help and another grown woman who could look at that girl and see a child beneath all of her competence.

The little girl helped of course. How could she not? A household that was that crowded had plenty to do and she had learned early that if she made herself useful people smiled at her and if she minded the children somebody thanked her and if she noticed what needed doing before anyone asked somebody called her a good girl and goodness, she liked hearing that. She liked being welcome. She liked being the person people were glad to have around.

And there was real love in those houses. I don't want you to mistake that. There were people who cared for that little girl simply because they cared for her, people who could see that she needed tending to herself. But the little girl was learning a lesson alongside their kindness and the lesson was this… If she could make herself necessary perhaps there would always be room for her. A lesson doesn't have to be put into words for it to settle deep into your bones and become a part of who you are.

After that came a woman from the church who drove a bus, a woman who opened her own home to the family of five. And having witnessed the burden placed on that little girl took the extraordinary position that the mother ought to do some mothering. The girl could help with her sisters certainly but they were not her children to raise. Now imagine saying such a thing out loud, imagine looking at a little girl who had been carrying grown responsibilities for years and suggesting that she might put some of them down.

Well the woman who did not want to be a Mommy did not take kindly to that suggestion and they moved again.

This time there wasn't another kind woman's spare room waiting for them. There was a shelter. And then another place where families could stay while they tried to find their feet. And you would be forgiven for thinking that this is where the story turned sad beyond repair. A girl of thirteen living without a home of her own with all those moves behind her and no certainty about the next one. Surely there couldn't be much luck left to count.

But you see the little girl didn't look at the world quite the way other people did.

Because for one thing, in those places there were grown people everywhere and those grown people did something rather astonishing. They looked after the children. All the children. There were people who minded one another's babies and checked that everybody was all right, people who knew how to sit the girl down and do her hair, who spoke to her about the things a girl needed to know as she grew into a young woman. The girl still helped with the little ones naturally. Sometimes somebody paid her a bit of money to watch their children while they ran an errand and she was pleased enough with that. But she was no longer the only pair of hands anybody could imagine using and she finally had some time to herself..

And there was family to be found there too. Aunties and Uncles and Cousins and people who would remain family long after the rooms they shared belonged to somebody else. When there was an eighth grade prom to prepare for it was those people who took the girl shopping for a dress, who did her hair, who saw that she was made ready for a night when a young lady ought to feel special. A girl becoming a woman without a mommy to guide her and somehow never entirely without women to help her along.

Then, as if somebody had looked at that child and said she hadn't had nearly enough good fortune, it turned out that one of the places that they stayed was across the road from a museum and a public library. Now if you paid any attention to that little girl you know what that meant to a little girl who taught herself to read as early as she did. The library was huge and beautiful, with books as far as she could see and air-conditioning which in a New Jersey summer is the sort of miracle that people didn't take lightly. She could go in there and be cool and quiet surrounded by thousands of books full of adventures and nobody expected her to wash a dish before she opened one of them.

And the museum was free to enter with free summer programs and all manner of wonderful things a girl could learn without needing to find money for the privilege. There were animals and science in rooms where children could imagine the world outside their little bubble of poverty. There was music in the atrium, sometimes jazz or classical. Real musicians making the air rumble with beautiful music that was free for anybody who happened to be there to listen. Imagine being homeless and having all that just across the street. The little girl thought she was extremely fortunate.

She absolutely loved the house where she could dress herself in clothes from another time and walk through the rooms imagining she lived there. She was a child without a home of her own strolling through a grand house connected to a museum, considering where she might put her belongings if someone was sensible enough to give her the keys. She could admire the rooms, take her time, and imagine a whole life for herself behind those walls. And nobody charged her a penny for dreaming.

And then there was Rodin. Because for the entire summer his work was at the museum and she got to see the Gates of Hell every single day and the little girl went back again and again to look at those great bronze doors, searching among the bodies and faces for a figure she had missed the day before. There was always another little something tucked into the great something and the longer she looked the more she found. She and her siblings studied those doors like they had been appointed their personal guardians although the little ones had no idea what they were looking for. They were just happy to be involved.

And it was an interesting turn of fortune because the church had already taught her to fear hell and somewhere around that age a girl at school had caught her eye in a way that made all of those warnings feel terribly personal. She hadn't said a word to the girl, hadn't acted on a thing, but she knew what she felt and she had been told often enough what happened to people who felt it. So she worried privately and sincerely about the fire that was waiting for her and yet she was standing in front of the gates of hell looking at something beautiful.

And wasn't she lucky?

And for years after that there were new places and new families and new homes that couldn't be kept because the mother who didn't want to be a mother still also didn't want to manage her bills. And even though the addresses kept changing, the little girl had developed an extraordinary talent for finding people to love and for making herself useful to them.

She could arrive a stranger and soon be the child that someone trusted, the girl who helped, the girl who could be counted on. She was getting older, her sisters were getting older, the years were passing, a succession of houses that didn't belong to them. And everywhere she went she learned to take just a little less space while making herself just a little bit more indispensable.

Isn't that a curious way to grow up? You have a girl who can become capable of managing almost anything and still have no idea what to do when someone asks what she wants. She can be praised for having such a big heart while learning to fold herself smaller and smaller around everybody else's needs. By the time the world begins calling her a young woman she has been somebody's helper for so long that she has no idea who she is outside of that.

But don't mistake her for an unhappy child who never knew delight. She had sisters she adored, a brother she had longed for and gotten back, more aunties and cousins than anybody could sensibly count and a museum in the library she could walk into whenever the doors were open. She could find joy in a book, a secondhand outfit, a song or an afternoon in a grand old house.

If you asked her about those years she might tell you first about the music or the library, the astonishing number of things that you could find hiding in the bronze gate.

Which she wouldn't think to tell you is what it cost her to become so good at being needed.

And wasn't she lucky.

And as she grew older the girl learned that being good was another kind of protection, although nobody ever explained quite how the arrangement worked.

The world around her had rules about girls, rules about what made them respectable and what made them available. Rules that seemed to change depending on who was doing the judging. Some girls were treated as somebody's little sister, somebody worth watching over, while other girls were spoken about as though their bodies belonged to the neighbourhood. And the little girl with her books and her literal answers and a complete failure to recognise half the things that boys and men were suggesting somehow found herself among the ones that the male folks decided ought to be protected.

If they asked her what she was wearing on the phone she would tell you about her Winnie the Pooh pyjamas because that's what she wore and that's what she had been asked. She had no reason to imagine that a grown man might be asking a child such questions for reasons that had nothing to do with sleepwear. If the man hadn't wanted to know about pyjamas he probably shouldn't have asked about pyjamas.

People called her innocent. They called her a good girl. The boys who treated other girls as objects of entertainment treated her as a little sister and she benefited from that distinction without having done anything to earn it.

It was not that she was better than the other girls, nor that the other girls were less in need of protection. The difference was in how people around them had chosen to see them. One girl was somebody's little sister, another somebody's entertainment. And the boys who made the distinction seemed really satisfied with their own generosity.

Imagine being congratulated for protecting one girl from the very sort of behaviour you were visiting on another. But that was the only world that she knew and for a long time she didn't understand why she was being treated differently. She only knew that the boys decided that she belonged in a category all her own.

It was years later that she would find language for what made her different. The words autistic and demisexual didn't exist in the world she lived in and many of the expectations other people placed on girls and women had never fit comfortably around her. She was not without desire or incapable of attraction, she simply did not experience those things according to the timetable and assumptions that seemed to govern everybody else's life. And when she did fall in love, it was with a woman. Well ain't that something?

And then the world that had been so eager to praise her for being a good girl once again had a remarkable number of opinions about what sort of woman she ought to become. And there were people who would excuse cruelty in a family, who could call violence discipline and neglect sacrifice, but who found the idea of a woman loving another woman altogether too difficult to tolerate.

And you had to wonder about that. A person could make a child miserable and call it love, could hurt somebody and call it correction, could demand obedience and call it respect. But two women wanting to build a life together? Now everybody has suddenly discovered their principles.

So you have that girl who spent her entire childhood being told how lucky she was to have a family and now she was discovering that belonging could come with conditions that she never agreed to. So she kept that part of her silent.

She was alive, clever and respectable and had escaped dangers that had swallowed other girls whole.

And wasn't she lucky?

Death meanwhile had not forgotten the child who arrived before her time. Before she was old enough to drink she was told that her body was broken and riddled with leukaemia. Although by then she had spent so many years being told she was dramatic, difficult and inclined to imagine illnesses that recognising the seriousness of her own symptoms had become a battle in itself. Her body had been warning her that something was wrong but when you've been taught from childhood that pain is something to be doubted, even the truth of your own suffering can become difficult to trust.

By the time the doctors found the cancer there was no longer any room for argument and for the first time ever her mother was humbled. You can't be a hypochondriac sitting on death's door.

There were hospital rooms and transfusions and treatments and the peculiar loneliness of being terribly ill while the people around you continue to have ordinary obligations that could not be interrupted indefinitely. Her mother had to work and study and a life that did not stop because her daughter was fighting to remain alive.

And I suppose there are some people who will tell you that everybody handles illness differently, that some people don't know what to say or do when somebody they love is sick. Maybe that's true. But there's something particularly lonely about being a 19-year-old fighting for your life and discovering that even then you are expected to understand why other people have more pressing things to attend to.

But the young woman survived. She had survived before, and the world loves a survivor. It loves a person who has overcome something dreadful and can be held up as proof of courage,

determination and the extraordinary resilience of the human spirit. What the world is less enthusiastic about is a survivor who continues to hurt or who needs help. A survivor who cannot turn the experience into a tidy, neat lesson about triumph.

It seems to me that the world will applaud you for climbing out of the grave then grow impatient when you ask for somewhere to sit because you are tired from the experience. And if you happen to need that seat for the rest of your life, well now you're just being difficult.

But she was alive though and that was no small blessing. She had survived an illness that might have killed her and for a while she believed that the worst her body could do was behind her.

And wasn't she lucky?

Then love arrived as love sometimes does, without consulting anybody's plans. There was an Australian woman and a friendship that had begun in the most unlikely of circumstances and then the remarkable business of two people finding one another across countries and cultures and deciding, against all the practical arguments that distance could offer, that they would rather be together than apart.

And there were plenty of practical arguments, believe me. Oceans are not small things. Neither are time zones, immigration, or the expense of travelling halfway around the world to see somebody you love. Love has never been particularly interested in making a sensible case for itself and these two women were apparently no exception.

So there was friendship, then love, then the difficult work of building a relationship across an ocean until eventually the young woman who had survived so much found herself preparing to leave the place she was born in.

Now imagine that.

The lucky little girl had grown into a lucky young woman. That lucky young woman was crossing the world for love, bound for a place that they called the Lucky Country.

And for a while it seemed the country intended to live up to its name.

She hadn't been there long when she developed a lung infection and needed to see a doctor.

Now, being there on a visa without Medicare, she had put money aside because she knew what illness could cost. She made sure that she explained that she wasn't covered, made certain that the receptionist understood and prepared herself to pay. And when she left that doctor's office and walked up to the reception, she was told it was just $50. She asked them if they had made a mistake because surely there had been some misunderstanding. She repeated again that she was American and she didn't have Medicare and she was prepared to pay the full amount

because she didn't want anybody coming after her later because somebody had made a mistake.

But there was no mistake.

And I wish you could've seen that woman trying to understand what had just happened because she had spent a lifetime believing that illness came with a price attached so big that a person had to calculate what they could afford before deciding whether they could afford to be sick. And here she was in a country where she could walk into a doctor's office, receive treatment and leave without sacrificing a month's savings.

And she wasn't about to argue with somebody trying to save her some money, she wasn't foolish, but she did need somebody to explain how a doctor managed to do their job without leaving people financially wounded in the process.

She was grateful. Of course she was grateful.

When you have spent your entire life being told to appreciate what you were given and then somebody gives you more than you ever imagined you might receive, gratitude comes easy.

And Australia gave her so much more than affordable medical care and medicine. It gave her a family who welcomed her, people who seemed to understand that loving somebody was not a transaction requiring an itemised account of every kindness. Her in-laws became the sort of family she had not known how to imagine when she was little and the sort who could offer care without making a performance of the sacrifice and that took some time to get used to.

For a woman who had been raised on a steady diet of gratitude with generous helpings of obligation served as a side, it was a new world. Here were people who could do something kind and then go on about their day apparently expecting nothing more than the pleasure of having done it. These people didn't give her speeches, there were no reminders and there was nobody standing over her with a running tally of everything that they'd ever done for her and everything that she ought to do in return. She barely knew what to make of it.

And they loved her still. Even when the marriage that brought them together one day came to an end, they loved her.

And she came to love this country not because she believed it was perfect but because she knew what it meant to live somewhere that offered less. That girl became a citizen, built a life, worked, studied and discovered that many of the protections that she had once thought extraordinary were regarded here as ordinary parts of living in society.

And there was love in her marriage, real love, though the woman had brought with her an old habit of making herself smaller so that everybody else might have room. She had learned to care for people, how to carry responsibilities without complaint, how to make herself useful enough that nobody would have a reason to send her away. Old lessons once learned have a way of following a person across oceans.

So she gave and she gave, sometimes without noticing how much of herself she had set aside. And because she had always been the capable one, the one who could manage, it was difficult for either woman to recognise what was happening when managing became harder.

You see, when you spend your whole life being the person who takes care of everybody else, people get used to being taken care of. And you get used to doing it. You can make a whole life out of anticipating what other people need and never quite notice that nobody has learned to anticipate what you need in return. So when her health began to deteriorate and her lungs became less reliable and her joints more painful, when the dizziness and the migraines and the collapsing made the simplest parts of daily life so difficult, she needed more than admiration for enduring it all, she needed help making sense of what was happening.

And she was fortunate enough to find some. She learned later that not everyone else traverses the same path that she did to get the same answer she had.

There was the cardiologist who listened when the woman spoke of the business of a body that could not always be persuaded to remain upright. She understood that a racing heart and a falling woman might have more demons than ordinary test revealed and she helped put names to troubles that had followed that girl for years. She opened doors to other specialists, including people who could help with the migraines that had taken up residence in this woman's head and decided to live there rent-free.

Later came a GP who, like the woman herself, had travelled from elsewhere and made Australia his home. He had the uncommon good sense to recognise that not knowing something was an invitation to learn rather than an excuse to dismiss it. He listened, asked questions, and worked alongside her as new pieces of the puzzle came into view.

Now that shouldn't be remarkable, should it? A doctor who listens when a patient tells him something is wrong. But spend enough years trying to persuade people that you know when your own body hurts and a person willing to believe you begins to feel like a rare and precious thing.

And with each answer the woman cried for the little girl who had complained of aching knees, who had walked on her toes and worn through her shoes,who couldn't sit still and who had no common sense and who had been laughed at for claiming Old Arthur had come calling on her too.

Wouldn't you know it? Old Arthur had been keeping company with her all along or rather one of his kin Ehlers Danlos.

There was comfort in finally being believed but there was sorrow too for the years when nobody had thought to listen. And the answers, welcome as they were, did not make the troubles disappear.

Nor did everybody who loved her understand what those troubles required.

And as the years passed her marriage began to bend beneath the weight of things neither woman had known how to carry. Some of her limitations were difficult for her wife to understand and the woman was still trying to be the capable person she had always been while her body grew less willing to play along.

Eventually that marriage came to an end. Now people like a marriage to have a villain when it falls apart. They want somebody to blame, someone to pity, a tidy account of who did what and why. The two people can love one another and still find that the life that they've made no longer has room for both of them to flourish.

And sometimes love isn't enough to undo the habits that people have carried into it. Sometimes one person has spent so long making herself small that neither of them quite knows what to do when she begins taking up room. And so they separated, and for a while they remained under the same roof, living in that curious country between what had been and what would come next, full-time. And it was during that time after the marriage had ended that illness came calling on the other side of the house.

And the wife, who was once healthy, began to discover what it meant to live in a body that would not do as it was told and some of the things that she had struggled to understand about the woman became clearer. And this wasn't some grand lesson delivered by the universe to teach anybody a thing or two. The woman wouldn't have wished illness on somebody that she loved, even somebody she no longer intended to be married to. But understanding has a way of arriving by roads we wouldn't have chosen and there were conversations they could have then that once seemed impossible.

It did not put the marriage back together. Nor did it need to. There were things to acknowledge, things to forgive and a friendship worth carrying forward after the rest had been laid down. So the woman came across the ocean for love, and while the marriage had ended, the love had not been a mistake. The country she came to call home was still home and she was able to keep the family she had gained.

And wasn't she lucky?

So when her health continued to demand more of her she believed that the country that had already given her so much would know what to do.

Why wouldn't she?

She had been sick in America and knew what happened there. She had survived cancer in a country where medical care could leave a person financially devastated and now she lived where public healthcare, legislation and services intending to help people who could not manage everything on their own existed.

Surely this was the place to be disabled.

And in many ways it was.

But then she needed help.

Not admiration for being resilient or congratulations for continuing to work despite her illnesses. And most definitely not another speech about how fortunate she was to have survived. She needed practical changes that would allow her to keep living the life that she had built.

And that was when she discovered that the lucky country that could be remarkably generous with the thing it had already decided to give could be remarkably difficult when somebody asked for something more.

So she could have healthcare and still struggle to have her symptoms believed. She could have legal protections and still be refused accommodations. She could be educated, employed and capable of doing her work and find herself excluded because the way she needed to do it was not the way the institution preferred.

During the pandemic she watched the world discover that work could be done from home and that university lectures could be delivered online and that meetings could happen without everybody gathering in the same room. It didn't matter that disabled people had been asking for these things for years only to be told that they were impractical or unreasonable but suddenly when the rest of the world needed them they became possible.

What was that something?

All those years of being told that the door couldn't be opened and the moment that everybody else needed to pass through, somebody found the key.

Apparently the technology had been there all along. Who would've thought?

But as the world returned to normal the doors that had opened began closing again, even for those bodies who had not suddenly become less disabled simply because everybody else was ready to move on.

And the woman who was doing really well at university, earning high distinctions, proving she could do the work and do it exceptionally well, needed continued access to the arrangements that had made that success possible. And once again she found herself explaining and asking and waiting while people who had never lived inside her body decided what she ought reasonably to be able to manage.

Now that was a familiar feeling.

She had been a little girl whose pain was laughed at, a young woman whose illness was doubted and now an adult whose accomplishments were admired right up until she needed somebody to make room for the body that had accomplished them.

And she knew the old bargain.

Be clever and useful, be grateful. Don't ask for too much.

And wasn't she lucky to live in a country that had disability rights at all?

And as she began looking for help she began to find other disabled people who knew the bargain just as well as she did. These were people who had spent years trying to obtain support, had been assessed and reassessed, asked to prove conditions that were simply not going to disappear and to explain the most intimate details of their loss to strangers who could decide whether they were sufficiently disabled to deserve assistance.

And then there were people who could not even begin the fight because they lacked the finances, the education, the language, the energy or the support to even begin to navigate the system.

The woman had been fortunate in many ways because she could read the legislation and understand it. That same mind that had once made grown people marvel over a child reading newspapers was put to work understanding the rules that governed her life.

But what happened to the people who couldn't?

What happened to somebody whose disability made the forms impossible to complete, whose poverty made legal advice inaccessible or whose exhaustion left them unable to appeal another refusal? What happened to the person who had spent so long being told to be grateful that they no longer believed they had the right to complain?

Because you can tell somebody they have rights all day long but if they cannot get through the front door of the place where those rights are supposed to be exercised, what exactly have you given them?

Nothing but a bunch of words and hot air.

Eventually that woman made fighting her career and encountered the same lesson over and over. Just because it is written into law does not not necessarily make it a right a person can exercise.

She saw how easy a system could praise independence while withholding the assistance that made independence possible. How a person could be told to participate in society and then be denied the support required to leave the house. How the language of choice and control could sit comfortably beside processes that left people with very little of either.

And she found herself doing something she had been doing since childhood, the purpose had changed. She read, she questioned, she untangled what other people had made unnecessarily difficult. Only now she could put those gifts to work beside people who had spent too long speaking without being heard. She had always found satisfaction in being useful but there was a

difference between serving because you had been taught your place depended upon it and serving because you had looked at the world, seen what needed doing and decided that your hands and mind might help.

She wasn't giving anybody a voice. They already had voices and plenty of them had been speaking for years. What they needed was for somebody to stop pretending not to hear.

And she began to understand that she had been looking at luck from one direction. For years she had measured her life against people who had less, just as she had been taught to do as a child.

Compared to an uninsured American facing an enormous medical bill she was fortunate. Compared to someone unable to obtain treatment at all she was fortunate. Compared with a person whose disability prevented them from navigating the system she had advantages she could not deny. Because that's how privilege works. It's not linear and you can have privileges in one place and be disadvantaged in another.

But what did any of that have to do with whether she was being treated fairly?

A person can have more than somebody else and still be denied when they are in need. A person can be protected in one part of their life and excluded in another. She could be grateful for the healthcare that kept her alive and angry about the barriers that prevented her from living fully.

And she could be Black, queer, disabled in a country where each of those things shaped her experience differently, sometimes bringing community, sometimes bringing isolation, sometimes leaving her as the only person in a room who seemed to notice what was being missed from the conversation.

She could love Australia and miss the Black voices and culture she had left behind. She could recognise the advantages that came with being an American migrant while seeing that Aboriginal people and other racial communities did not necessarily receive the same welcome or opportunities. She could be thankful for her citizenship and still insist that belonging was more than having the correct papers.

But she loved Australia. Loved it enough to make a life here and loved it enough to call it home and loved it enough to notice when it wasn't living up to the things that it said about itself.

All of those things could be true.

The country had given her more than she ever expected.

And she discovered that was not always enough.

Wasn't she lucky?

Yes.

But wasn't she entitled to more?

Yes she was.

Now I could tell you that that little girl grew up, found her voice, learned to stand up for herself and lived happily ever after but that would be the sort of ending people like to give stories when they don't want to listen to the complicated parts and this is not that kind of story. The woman is still here, still living in a body that does not always cooperate, still working, still loving, still learning, still finding reasons to laugh in a world that frequently makes very little sense. She has a home of her own now with books and colour and growing things and space enough for whatever curious idea takes hold of her next. There's no longer a household full of people whose needs have to be attended to before she can consider her own. There are people who love her, people who believe her, people who will come when she calls and she is learning that asking them to come need not be accompanied by an apology.

And she is grateful.

Grateful for the doctors who listened and for the medicines that helped and for the people who believed her, for the love that brought her across the ocean, for the country that offered her the possibility she might never have had if she remained where she was born. Because she has good reason to think that she might not have survived in America as long as she has survived here and she will not pretend otherwise. But she has finally learned something that nobody thought to teach the little girl with the old newspapers and achy knees.

Gratitude is not a debt that must be repaid with silence.

You can thank somebody for opening the door and still ask why the next one is locked. And you can appreciate the medicine that keeps you alive and still demand the support that allows you to live. You can love your country and expect it to do better, not in spite of that love but because of it. And you can be lucky in one part of your life without surrendering the right to name injustice in another.

Because you see, that was the trick of it all along. Somebody was always ready to remind that little girl how much worse things could've been, as though the possibility of a worse life meant that she had no right to one a better one.

She could've been born somewhere else, she could've had no mother, she could've had no education, she could've died when she was born, when she was 19 or any number of times afterwards.

And all of that was true.

But she hadn't.

She was here.

Surely being here means something more than spending the rest of her days thanking everybody for allowing it.

So the little girl who spent so many years hearing about how lucky she was to that point that she have mistaken lucky for her given name has grown into a woman knows better now. She can look at the life she's made and recognise the gifts in it for herself without waiting for somebody else to tell her what she ought to appreciate.

She knows now that surviving is not the same as thriving and that being tolerated is not the same as belonging and that a right should not depend upon the generosity of whoever happens to be holding the door.

And the work she does has given her another reason to keep asking questions, for there are people all across this lucky country who are still waiting for somebody to listen, people who have been told to be patient, to be reasonable, to be grateful for the portion of help has found the way to them.

She has heard that tune before and knows the words by heart.

But luck is not a leash and I will be damned if I let anybody else use my gratitude to keep me on one. Because I have spent more than enough of my life being grateful at the end of somebody else's rope.

So I will go on loving this country and go on asking more of it. I will go on standing beside people who have every right to be heard, whether fortune has smiled on them or turned its face away.

Because if this is the Lucky Country, then perhaps its greatest achievement will not be how fortunate some of us are to have found our way here, but how determined we become to make sure that everybody who lives here has the opportunity to flourish.

And wouldn't that be something?

A country where good fortune was welcome, but nobody had to depend upon it.

Where a person could simply live, love, thrive and belong without having to be quite so lucky.