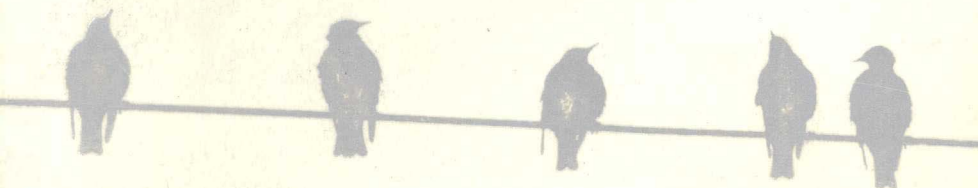


The Lucky Ones



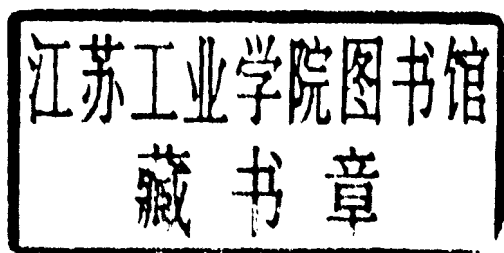
Rachel Cusk

'She is able to make a work of art out of her drawerful of our daily junk.'

JOHN BAYLEY

The Lucky Ones

RACHEL CUSK



FOURTH ESTATE • *London*

First published in Great Britain in 2003 by
Fourth Estate
A Division of HarperCollins *Publishers*
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB
www.4thestate.com

Copyright © Rachel Cusk 2003

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The right of Rachel Cusk to be identified as the author of this
work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library.

ISBN 1-85702-912-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system, in any form or by any
means, without permission in writing from Fourth Estate.

Typeset by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd,
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Lucky Ones

Rachel Cusk was born in 1967 and is the author of three earlier novels: *Saving Agnes*, which won the Whitbread First Novel Award, *The Temporary* and *The Country Life*, which won a Somerset Maugham Award. *A Life's Work* was her acclaimed and controversial account of becoming a mother.

Also by Rachel Cusk

FICTION:

Saving Agnes

The Temporary

The Country Life

NON-FICTION:

A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother

‘The firm compact little girls were not half so brave as the tender, delicate-looking little boys.’

Katherine Mansfield, *At the Bay*

Contents

<i>1. Confinement</i>	I
<i>2. The Way You Do It</i>	27
<i>3. The Sacrifices</i>	59
<i>4. Mrs Daley's Daughter</i>	95
<i>5. Matters of Life and Death</i>	158

1. *Confinement*

Michelle had to get up with her now when she had to go. She was so big she bumped into things. Mostly it was four or five times a night but tonight it was more, eight times already and it wasn't light yet. She was stuck on her back and it was tickling down there. It was like someone was sitting on her, it was that heavy. She couldn't breathe lying on her back. Sometimes she felt she was being pushed out of her own body. It was like being killed, she thought, and then said sorry in her head for thinking it.

'Shel,' she whispered. *'I've got to go.'*

For a minute there was nothing and then she heard Michelle get up. She saw her looming around in the dark as if she was drunk.

'Mind out,' she said and Michelle swore. There was a thud and the sound of gasping. *'What happened?'* she said.

Michelle was laughing. She was making gasping sounds and wheezing and Kirsty felt tremors start in her own stomach, the big muscles flapping and rolling upwards in waves and making her lungs hurt.

'Don't, I'll wet myself,' she said.

Michelle was rolling her over on to her side. She was still laughing; her arms were shaking and her hair danced jerkily over Kirsty's face. Kirsty stuck her legs out into the dark and Shel pulled her off the bed. Her feet made contact with

the cold floor but her body was in a sort of landslide, things pouring downwards, and she reeled over after them, clutching at Michelle in the darkness so that Michelle staggered backwards. She thought they might just give and give until they went over but Michelle planted herself and pushed back against her. They were both shaking with laughter. She couldn't see a thing.

'I've wet myself,' she said. 'I'm wet at the back.'

Michelle got her under the arms.

'Hold it in,' she said.

'I can't.'

Water was coming out from between her legs; the spring of her bladder felt busted, the water just came out in a torrent and made a gushing sound on the floor.

'Christ,' said Michelle, 'you sound like a horse pissing.'

'I can't stop. Are you holding me?'

'Christ,' said Michelle.

'Shel,' said Kirsty, 'I can't stop.'

She smelled salt and half retched.

'It's your waters,' said Michelle. Her nails were digging into the tops of Kirsty's arms. There was pain, of a kind that couldn't be changed. She felt Michelle's hot flat body down her back.

'Sorry,' she said as the warm water flowed over their feet. She started to cry because she knew this meant the baby was coming. Michelle was pulling her back towards the bed. Her feet skidded and skated on the wet floor. She paddled in the air for a minute crying and then Michelle heaved her on to the mattress so that she was lying on her side and lifted her legs up after her. Her wet things were going cold. She shut her eyes and put her arms around her belly. Somewhere down the corridor she could hear

women fighting in one of the cells in the dark. The baby travelled up through the core of her body; she held it, she embraced it inside. A fog of sleep hung in her head and she moved in and out of it. For a while she forgot where she was, and then she forgot that there was a baby, except that she felt more concentrated, denser. She felt more herself than she had for a long time, so that while sleeping she formed the idea that she was at home in her bedroom and that on the other side of her eyelids was her old wallpaper with the pattern of blue flowers; that her mum was downstairs making a cup of tea and that nothing had ever happened, nothing separated her from herself. She lay like this until the wetness around her pushed against her sleep and began to trouble her, so that she had to wake up and find out what it was. And then she saw the small room, bleak and grey in the dawn, and Michelle lying in a heap on the other bed, and her own stomach, which looked like big trouble, which looked like a bad dream. The light was like dirt. Doors were banging and people were shouting in the corridor outside. Shel had put a sheet down on the floor in the dark and it lay there twisted and sodden, seeming to replicate something in Kirsty's head. She closed her eyes again and this time like a fright she saw the house burning, with big branches of fire coming out of the top, and Julie and the children standing at the window with red behind them, waving.

'I couldn't hold it in,' she said to the warden, who was now standing in the smudgy light at the end of her bed. She couldn't sit up. Tiredness pressed against her face like a boot. The mess of her hair scratched at her forehead and cheeks.

'Clean it up,' said the warden, to her and Michelle both.

She went out and locked the door behind her.

‘Have you got pains?’ said Michelle. She was standing in the middle of the room. Her face was white and worried like a fist.

‘No. I’m getting up.’

‘I think we should tell them.’

Keys scratched in the door. The warden came back in and put a mop and a bucket down on the floor. Then she went away again.

‘I’m not telling till I have to.’

The truth was she felt sick, the way she had at the beginning: it was the salty smell of the waters, a used-up dishwater smell with nothing sharp in it. It turned her stomach. And she felt like she was on the edge of it all, too, with the water gone, like you feel when you’ve jumped but haven’t yet hit the ground, a kind of backpedalling in your head, a feeling of regret. She didn’t feel any pain but she knew it was there. All this time it had waited in her body, quiet. It had waited, and now that the time had come for it to take her baby it just could, without her permission.

‘I need my mum,’ she said, starting to cry again, and Michelle didn’t say anything. She was mopping the floor and putting the wet sheets in a bag.

‘Come on then,’ she said when she’d done.

She helped Kirsty into her big sweatshirt and the leggings with the panel sewn into the front. She tied up her trainers for her, squatting on the floor, breathing hard, while Kirsty stood there big and swaying, looking down like someone looking down from the top of a tall building and thinking about jumping. Then they went and stood by the door, waiting to be unlocked.

*

The prison was white, and when the sun came through the high-up windows the bars made strange, underwater shadows on the walls. You could never get any perspective with so much white: it made you feel small, and far from the edges of things. Kirsty would run her finger along the walls as she walked, wanting to get some texture, some purchase. The prison reminded her of something, some long-ago part of her life before things made any sense to her, when strange noises instead of words came out of people's mouths and rooms could suddenly turn upside down and she was a static point in a kaleidoscope of revolving angles and hours. Nothing had a beginning or an end then, and prison was the same. Her mum said that when she was little she used to carry around a bit of old blanket, and would rub the slippery, shiny edge between her finger and thumb. It was that edge, that border she was after. She liked the feeling of knowing where something stopped. She still sometimes looked around herself and wondered how that little girl had ended up in a place like this. Her mum would have said the same, but she could never bring herself to visit. Kirsty's mum always used to take her side in everything. She thought the best of her, until that became impossible. Now her mum just said that she didn't know. It was her auntie Dawn who did the talking.

'Webber!' shouted the warden across the refectory. She had the post; she shouted other names and women got up from their tables and went over.

'I'll go,' said Michelle.

'You not eating?' said Carol.

'I don't fancy it,' said Kirsty, staring at a piece of dry toast on her plate. *I want to die*, she thought. Her stomach was big and hot and tight. It pressed against the edge of the table.

‘There’s no room in you at the end, is there,’ said Carol.

Kirsty remembered waking up one morning, when she was about ten, feeling so bad that she thought something about the world had changed. All her bones ached and she felt hot and cold and sick to her stomach, and she couldn’t move, not one inch; and she lay there thinking, What am I going to do, how am I going to go on? It was as if kindness and understanding had never existed; as if she was all alone, and her life was a race, like in a dream, that something was stopping her from running. She had to go on but she couldn’t go on, and there was trouble, trouble in her head and behind her eyes and trouble in the pit of her stomach. *You’re ill*, her mum said when she came in, explaining it all, putting everything back in the right place in her head with just two words. Kirsty felt it now, that same confusion, except this time everything anyone said or did made it worse. Her leggings were wet at the crotch. The baby was coming. Her heart thumped in her mouth as she saw the faces of the other women, stiff with unhappiness and boredom and with never being looked at, faces that had lost their language.

‘I carried small with both mine,’ said Kay. ‘They never believed me in the hospital, they kept trying to send me home. The second one was born in the lift.’

‘They must have got a surprise when the doors opened,’ said Rita. ‘You squealing like a stuck pig with your fanny on show.’

‘You’re lucky it was quick, though,’ said Janice. ‘It isn’t always quick like that. I was three days with my first.’

Kirsty could see Carol giving the others significant looks, but she didn’t care, she wasn’t really listening: they never meant anything to her, their stories, it just reminded her of

what strangers they were to each other. You only tell people about your pain when you expect them to mind, but that was prison all over, everyone heard the echoes around themselves and then tried to pretend they weren't there. They knew you didn't care and they told you anyway. Michelle dropped a letter on the table in front of her and she opened it. *Dear Kirsty, You must be very near your big day by now and I hope you're managing. I know from personal experience how difficult those last few weeks are and cannot imagine how much more difficult for you, being so far from the people who love you.* Kirsty averted her eyes from the notepaper, which had little yellow flowers all around the edge. Dawn's writing was round and she pressed hard on the paper. All in a rush the smell and feel of her aunt came at her and even though it was welcome it was too strong, she had to put her hand to her mouth, thinking she would retch. She hadn't heard from Dawn in a while; she came to the prison when she could but it was a long way, and anyway Kirsty would rather Dawn spent the time on her mum. She started to fold the letter, thinking she'd read it later, because just now there didn't seem to be any room in her head for the words to go in, but as she was folding it she saw it said 'bad news' further down. *I don't like to be the bearer of bad news, especially at this difficult time, but I know Kirsty that you would want to know about your mother whatever the circumstances and I wanted to tell you before someone else did. Some men broke into her house Wednesday night, the night before last, and knocked your poor mother about and then set about breaking and destroying everything they could while she lay there helpless. She is in St George's now with two broken ribs and some cuts and bruises and one or two other things which I won't go into because you've got too much on your plate already. Needless to say your poor mother is in absolute shock, and she hasn't even seen the house yet,*

which is uninhabitable, having been defiled in ways I won't describe in detail here – suffice it to say these were evil and disgusting men with no respect for anything. What could have been the motive for such an attack, you may ask.

Kirsty turned the page over. Her hand was shaking so that she couldn't hold it still. *Well your mother recognised one of the men as being Julie's brother Gary, who I've since heard is only a week out of prison himself and now I suppose will be going straight back in, which seems incredible because I remember him as being quite a nice little boy, but that was years ago and they all seem to go wrong somehow in the end round here, even the nice ones –*

When they heard her shout the other women looked around. They saw a girl with tears and mucus running down her face and her friends closing round her, and this was a sight which usually they ignored, prisoners and warders both, because people were always crying and showing their emotions here; there was nothing to stop them, nothing to soak up the feelings, except in this case the girl was nine months pregnant and one or two of the women wondered whether she might be starting.

Back in the cell Michelle had her arms around Kirsty. They were hairy, like a man's. Michelle was rocking her to and fro. It was important to Michelle that she was able to give people emotional support. Kirsty felt an urge to push Michelle away from her, to run from her squat, muscled body. At that moment Michelle's body just felt like another thing she had no choice about. Sometimes she felt that things between her and Michelle were real and sometimes she didn't. Prison was like that. You kept wondering what friendship could be worth in a place like this – they were all people other people

wouldn't want to be around. What was the point of pretending they meant something to each other? She couldn't have said that to Michelle. Michelle was hard, but Kirsty knew you could kill her by saying that sort of thing.

Michelle was one of those people who had made something of herself in prison. She hadn't had much luck in her life, Kirsty could see that. It wasn't the kind of bad luck you had to be born on the Barrows, where Kirsty grew up. On the Barrows you were in it together; it was where you came from, like it or not, and although most people there didn't like it they made sure they had a laugh and stuck two fingers up at everybody else. Michelle spent most of her time in care when she was a kid. Sometimes they used to try sending her back to her mum, but her mum was a sad case, Michelle said, she drank and lived on the street half the time and only thought about getting herself involved with men. There was always some man around her mum was trying to be different for. What would usually happen was that Michelle would come back and the man would leave, until her mum started saying that every time Michelle came back she ruined everything, because she couldn't concentrate with Michelle around asking for things, at which point Michelle stopped coming back. Kirsty couldn't imagine having a mum like that. Her mum had never had anything to do with men, after Kirsty's father. Even the mums on the Barrows put the children first and the men second. Michelle was in prison for murder. She killed her husband. If you asked her what she was in for she'd say self-defence. Kirsty hadn't wanted to share a cell with Michelle, with a murderer. She'd cried silently with fear all the first night and didn't dare to get up for the toilet even though she was desperate. It never occurred to her that Michelle might feel the same

thing about her, Kirsty, although as it turned out Michelle thought that everyone was innocent no matter what they'd done. She's just the victim of her circumstances, she'd say about this person or the other. It almost annoyed Kirsty that it didn't seem to matter to Michelle whether she, Kirsty, had actually done what they said she'd done.

There was a campaign for Michelle. All sorts of people wrote to her, journalists, politicians talking about women's rights. Kirsty didn't even know what women's rights were before she shared a cell with Michelle, but she knew now. There had been a television programme about her case, as Michelle called it. No one suggested that Michelle hadn't killed her husband: what they said was that she shouldn't have gone to prison for it. It didn't make any sense to Kirsty, until Michelle showed her the file of articles she'd cut out from the newspaper, which told what Michelle's husband had done to her. Michelle said to Kirsty once that she didn't particularly want to get out of prison; it was everyone else that wanted her out. Everything's the wrong way round in my life, she said. In here I feel free. If I was outside I would feel like I was standing still in time; I would always be stuck in that moment when I was in the kitchen holding the knife. I don't think I'd ever be able to progress beyond it. She told Kirsty about a man she'd read about in the newspaper, who had been sent to prison for burning down a barn, and on the day he'd been let out had gone back and burned it down again. I can really relate to that, said Michelle.

Michelle lifted weights in the gym and did prison courses and read books, piles of them, books about everything, books which always made life more complicated than it seemed so that it made your head hurt to think about it. To