BRIDGE
OF
SIGHS

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ALFRED A. KNOFF NEW YORK 1997
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KNOWLEDGMENTS

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FIRST, THE FACTS.

My name is Louis Charles Lynch. I am sixty years old, and for nearly forty of those years I’ve been a devoted if not terribly exciting husband to the same lovely woman, as well as a doting father to Owen, our son, who is now himself a grown, married man. He and his wife are childless and likely, alas, to so remain. Earlier in my marriage it appeared as if we’d be blessed with a daughter, but a car accident when my wife was in her fourth month caused her to miscarry. That was a long time ago, but Sarah still thinks about the child and so do I.

Perhaps what’s most remarkable about my life is that I’ve lived all of it in the same small town in upstate New York, a thing unheard of in this day and age. My wife’s parents moved here when she was a little girl, so she has few memories before Thomaston, and her situation isn’t much different from my own. Some people, upon learning how we’ve lived our lives, are unable to conceal their chagrin on our behalf, that our lives should be so limited, as if experience so geographically circumscribed could be neither rich nor satisfying. When I assure them that it has been both, their smiles suggest we’ve been blessed with self-deception by way of compensation for all we’ve missed. I remind such people that until fairly recently the vast majority of humans have been circumscribed in precisely this manner and that lives can also be constrained by a great many other things: want, illness, ignorance, loneliness and lack of faith, to name just a few. But it’s probably true my wife would have traveled more if she’d married someone else, and my unwillingness to become the vagabond is just one of the ways I’ve been, as I said, an unexciting if loyal and unwavering companion. She’s heard all of my arguments, philosophical and other, for staying put; in her mind they all amount to little more than my natural inclination, inertia rationalized. She may be right. That said, I don’t think Sarah has been unhappy in our marriage. She loves me and our son and, I think, our life. She assured me of this not long ago when it appeared she might lose her own and, sick with worry, I asked if she’d regretted the good simple life we’ve made together.

Though our pace, never breakneck, has slowed recently, I like to think that the real reason we’ve not seen more of the world is that Thomaston itself has always been both luxuriant and demanding. In addition to the corner store we inherited from my parents, we now own and operate two other convenience stores. My son wryly refers to these as “the Lynch Empire,” and while the demands of running them are not overwhelming, they are relentless and time-consuming. Each is like a pet that refuses to be housebroken and resents being left alone. In addition to these demands on my time, I also serve on a great many committees, so many, in fact, that late in life I’ve acquired a nickname, Mr. Mayor—a tribute to my civic-mindedness that contains, I’m well
aware, an element of gentle derision. Sarah believes that people take advantage of my good nature, my willingness to listen carefully to everyone, even after it’s become clear they have nothing to say. She worries that I often return home late in the evening and then not in the best of humors, a natural result of the fact that the civic pie we divide grows smaller each year, even as our community’s needs continue dutifully to grow. Every year the arguments over how we spend our diminished and diminishing assets become less civil, less respectful, and my wife believes it’s high time for younger men to shoulder their fair share of the responsibility, not to mention the attendant abuse. In principle I heartily agree, though in practice I no sooner resign from one committee than I’m persuaded to join another. And Sarah’s no one to talk, serving as she has, until her recent illness, on far too many boards and development committees.

Be all that as it may, the well-established rhythms of our adult lives will soon be interrupted most violently, for despite my inclination to stay put, we are soon to travel, my wife and I. I have but one month to prepare for this momentous change and mentally adjust to the loss of my precious routines—my rounds, I call them—that take me into every part of town on an almost daily basis. Too little time, I maintain, for a man so set in his ways, but I have agreed to all of it. I’ve had my passport photo taken, filled out my application at the post office and mailed all the necessary documents to the State Department, all under the watchful eye of my wife and son, who seem to believe that my lifelong aversion to travel might actually cause me to sabotage our plans. Owen in particular sustains this unkind view of his father, as if I’d deny his mother anything, after all she’s been through. “Watch him, Ma,” he advises, narrowing his eyes at me in what I hope is mock suspicion. “You know how he is.”

Italy. We will go to Italy. Rome, then Florence, and finally Venice.

No sooner did I agree than we were marooned in a sea of guidebooks that my wife now studies like a madwoman. “Aqua alta,” she said last night after she’d finally turned off the light, her voice near and intimate in the dark. She found my hand and gave it a squeeze under the covers. “In Venice there’s something called aqua alta. High water.”

“How high?” I said.

“The calles flood.”

“What’s a calle?”

“If you’d do some reading, you’d know that streets in Italy are called calles.”

“How many of us need to know that?” I asked her. “You’re going to be there, right? I’m not going alone, am I?”

“When the aqua alta is bad, all of St. Mark’s is underwater.”
“The whole church?” I said. “How tall is it?”

She sighed loudly. “St. Mark’s isn’t a church. It’s a plaza. The plaza of San Marco. Do you need me to explain what a plaza is?”

Actually, I’d known that calles were streets and hadn’t really needed an explanation of aqua alta either. But my militant ignorance on the subject of all things Italian has quickly become a game between us, one we both enjoy.

“We may need boots,” my wife ventured.

“We have boots.”

“Rubber boots. Aqua alta boots. They sound a siren.”

“If you don’t have the right boots, they sound a siren?”

She gave me a swift kick under the covers. “To warn you. That the high water’s coming. So you’ll wear your boots.”

“Who lives like this?”

“Venetians.”

“Maybe I’ll just sit in the car and wait for the water to recede.”

Another kick. “No cars.”

“Right. No cars.”

“Lou?”

“No cars,” I repeated. “Got it. Calles where the streets should be. No cars in the calles, though, not one.”

“We haven’t heard back from Bobby.”

Our old friend. Our third musketeer from senior year of high school. Long, long gone from us. She didn’t have to tell me we hadn’t heard back. “Maybe he’s moved. Maybe he doesn’t live in Venice anymore.”

“Maybe he’d rather not see us.”

“Why? Why would he not want to see us?”

I could feel my wife shrug in the dark, and feel our sense of play running aground. “How’s your story coming?”

“Good,” I told her. “I’ve been born already. A chronological approach is best, don’t
you think?”

“I thought you were writing a history of Thomaston,” she said.

“Thomaston’s in it, but so am I.”

“How about me?” she said, taking my hand again.

“Not yet. I’m still just a baby. You’re still downstate. Out of sight, out of mind.”

“You could lie. You could say I lived next door. That way we’d always be together.”

Playful again, now.

“I’ll think about it,” I said. “But the people who actually lived next door are the problem. I’d have to evict them.”

“I wouldn’t want you to do that.”

“It is tempting to lie, though,” I admitted.

“About what?” She yawned, and I knew she’d be asleep and snoring peacefully in another minute or two.

“Everything.”

“Lou?”

“What.”

“Promise me you won’t let it become an obsession.”

It’s true. I’m prone to obsession. “It won’t be,” I promised her.

But I’m not the only reason my wife is on guard against obsession. Her father, who taught English at the high school, spent his summers writing a novel that by the end had swollen to more than a thousand single-spaced pages and still with no end in sight. I myself am drawn to shorter narratives. Of late, obituaries. It troubles my wife that I read them with my morning coffee, going directly to that section of the newspaper, but turning sixty does that, does it not? Death isn’t an obsession, just a reality. Last month I read of the death—in yet another car accident—of a man whose life had been intertwined with mine since we were boys. I slipped it into the envelope that contained my wife’s letter, the one that announced our forthcoming travels, to our old friend Bobby, who will remember him well. Obituaries, I believe, are really less about death than the odd shapes life takes, the patterns that death allows us to see. At sixty, these patterns are important.

“I’m thinking fifty pages should do it. A hundred, tops. And I’ve already got a title: The Dullest Story Ever Told.”
When she had no response to this, I glanced over and saw that her breathing had become regular, that her eyes were closed, lids fluttering.

It’s possible, of course, that Bobby might prefer not to see us, his oldest friends. Not everyone, Sarah reminds me, values the past as I do. Dwells on it, she no doubt means. Loves it. Is troubled by it. Alludes to it in conversation without appropriate transition. Had I finished my university degree, as my mother desperately wanted me to, it would have been in history, and that might have afforded me ample justification for this inclination to gaze backward. But Bobby—having fled our town, state and nation at eighteen—may have little desire to stroll down memory lane. After living all over Europe, he might well have all but forgotten those he fled. I can joke about mine being “the dullest story ever told,” but to a man like Bobby it probably isn’t so very far from the truth. I could go back over my correspondence with him, though I think I know what I’d find in it—polite acknowledgment of whatever I’ve sent him, news that someone we’d both known as boys has married, or divorced, or been arrested, or diagnosed, or died. But little beyond acknowledgment. His responses to my newsy letters will contain no requests for further information, no Do you ever hear from so-and-so anymore? Still, I’m confident Bobby would be happy to see us, that my wife and I haven’t become inconsequential to him.

Why not admit it? Of late, he has been much on my mind.

MY FATHER was Louis Patrick Lynch—Big Lou, to his friends. In christening me Louis Charles—the Charles for my mother’s father—they meant for me to be called Lou as well, though I’ve been known all my life by the nickname given to me on the first day of kindergarten at Cayoga Elementary School. Miss Vincent’s roll sheet contained her students’ first names, their middle initials and, of course, their surnames. If that’s what she’d read that first morning—Louis C. Lynch—I suspect I’d have had a different childhood, though if she hadn’t made the mistake, maybe somebody else would’ve later. She knew my father, and you couldn’t blame her for assuming I was called Lou, and if she’d said “Lou Lynch,” everything would have been fine. But for some reason she chose also to read my middle initial. Lou C. Lynch was the name she called, and when she did, I raised my hand. The other children turned to look at me, and I could tell by their puzzled looks that something had occurred, something I alone had missed. Even then all might have been fine if Miss Vincent had simply noted my raised hand and proceeded down her list to the next name. Instead she paused, her ear registering what her eye had missed, and in her hesitation, that empty beat, someone said, “His name’s Lucy?”

After school, I told my mother how everyone had laughed at me, that I’d been called Lucy all day. She nodded and sighed, conceding sadly, “Children are cruel. Don’t let them know it hurts your feelings and they’ll forget.”

“How?” I asked, meaning how could I keep them from knowing.
“Laugh along with them,” she suggested.

She must have suspected that this would be impossible for me, and my father must have known it, too, because when I told him the story that evening, his eyes were instantly full. “For heaven’s sake, Lou,” my mother said when she saw this. I don’t know whether he felt bad about the derision I’d endured my first day of school or guilty because in naming me he and my mother hadn’t anticipated what might happen or whether he’d understood what my mother did not—that my schoolmates would never forget, never tire of the joke, and that I’d be known for the rest of my life as Lucy. As I have been.

Thomastan, New York, is a place you’ve never heard of, unless you’re a history buff, an art lover or a cancer researcher. The town was named for Sir Thomas Whitcombe, of French and Indian War fame. Our other claim to fame, Robert Noonan, the painter, grew up in Thomaston, though he left when he was barely eighteen and has lived his adult life abroad.

Otherwise, as I say, you’re unlikely to have heard of Thomaston, unless you work in medical research, in which case you may remember the now-famous study done years ago to explain why our cancer statistics were off any actuarial chart. The principal culprit was, as we all suspected, the old tannery, boarded up these last forty years, which dumped its dyes and chemicals into the Cayoga Stream, which meanders through most of Thomaston before finally emptying into the Barge Canal five miles to the south. Throughout my youth the Cayoga ran different colors, according to that day’s dye batch. Red, of course, for those who know their history and are susceptible to metaphor, was the most unnerving. Historians will recall that the Adirondack headwaters of our modest stream were the site of the Cayoga Massacre the year before the start of the American Revolution. For reasons largely obscured by time, a garrison of soldiers from then largely Dutch Albany was en route to Montreal when a band of Mohawks, stirred up by local Tories, fell upon them. Completely surprised by the ambush, two hundred men were butchered in a matter of hours. According to local legend, so much blood was shed that the Cayoga ran red down from the Adirondacks and through the farmlands to the south all the way to Albany, though this last is likely a political statement.

Some have suggested that the owners of the old tannery, having exterminated everything in a living stream and poisoned the people along its banks, should all be behind bars, and they may be right, but it’s worth remembering that this same tannery sustained our lives for more than a century, that the very dyes that had caused the Cayoga to run red every fourth or fifth day also put bread and meat on our tables. When I was a boy, people were afraid only when the stream didn’t change color, because that meant layoffs and hard times would soon follow. Without admitting it, however, everyone was wary of the stream, and those who could afford to built homes away from its banks. When the cancer study was published, it merely reinforced the wisdom of our common practice. The nearer you lived to the Cayoga, the more likely that you’d contract cancer, even the most exotic varieties of which are represented in
unnatural abundance.

Can it be that what provides for us is the very thing that poisons us? Who hasn’t considered this terrible possibility?

Though some of the very first fortunes of the New World were made right in our valley, Thomaston is today a poor town. Like Gaul it is divided into three parts, though these are by no means equal. The two largest sectors are located on opposite sides of—if you can believe it—Division Street. The East End, where I spent much of my youth, is lower middle class, whereas the West End is industrial and poor. Thomaston’s few black families reside in a West End neighborhood called the Hill. None of them, according to my research, descend from the slaves who were kept at Whitcombe Hall, though it’s true that Sir Thomas, like so many Tories, was a slaveholder. But the ancestors of our black families moved here from the South and Midwest just before the First World War.

The third section of Thomaston—the Borough—is located in the northeast sector, contiguous to both the East End and Whitcombe Park, and while it’s smaller than the East and West Ends in terms of both geography and population, what little wealth we have is concentrated here. Needless to say, this is where you’ll find Thomaston Country Club and the prettiest of our town parks, the one that houses a band shell for summer concerts, as well as the most desirable elementary school (Thomaston children have never been bused). Borough streets are wide and tree lined, our houses set back from the pavement and our lawns well tended, for the most part by ourselves; our elderly hire their neighbors’ children to mow in the summer, rake in the autumn and shovel during our long upstate winters. Borough sidewalks run flat and true so our children won’t be injured on their bicycles and Rollerblades. As kids growing up, we rode bikes with little regard for safety; in the summer all the boys wore shorts and rode shirtless, sometimes even shoeless, and whenever we went over the handlebars, we bled from our knees, elbows and foreheads. Now, decades later, recalling our injuries, we Borough parents spare our children similar scrapes and bruises by dressing them in high-tech helmets plus neon-colored knee and elbow pads. Nor do we mind if they’re scoffed at by kids from the less affluent West or East End. We have the wherewithal to keep our children safe, so we do.

Borough residents are mostly Protestant and politically conservative, descendants of Tories like Sir Thomas Whitcombe, who settled our valley and built the great Halls. Loyal to King George, if they’d had their way, they would’ve preserved the Adirondacks, if not all of America, as a giant game reserve for aristocratic Englishmen. My wife’s father used to argue that instead of restoring the Hall, as Sir Thomas’s great residence is locally known, to its former splendor, the town fathers should have razed it and erected a discount store in its place. But he was a man of many opinions, most of them outrageous, and in any case the Hall, by then a mere shell, caught fire years ago and burned to its foundations.
Though we in the Borough are outnumbered by the ethnic Catholics and registered Democrats in both the East and West Ends, our town always has a Republican mayor and is considered a write-off by downstate liberals who don’t waste much campaign money in our local television market. As an East End boy, I wondered how a majority could be outvoted by a minority, and my father could offer no explanation except that this was the way it had always been. My mother, on the other hand, knew why. The reason was fingernails. People in the Borough had clean fingernails because they never had to get them dirty, whereas West Enders got them so dirty, day after day, that they never came entirely clean, and eventually they stopped trying; East Enders like us worked hard, too, my mother claimed, but it was our nature to scrub ourselves raw with stiff brushes and coarse soap, to scrub until we bled, so our fingernails were as clean as those that never dirtied them to begin with. It was human nature, she explained. You don’t identify with people worse off than you are. You make your deals, if you can, with those who have more, because you hope one day to have more yourself. Understand that, she claimed, and you understand America, not just Thomaston. When I asked if it would always be that way, she opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again. “How about I ask you that question in about twenty years?” she suggested. I agreed enthusiastically, enjoying the idea that in twenty years I might be smart enough to figure out what she couldn’t, so we set the date and pledged not to forget, but of course we did.

Though we now live in the Borough and have done so for years, I doubt anyone in Thomaston is more democratic and egalitarian than my wife and me. I myself, in a sense, am spread all over town by virtue of owning property in both the West and East Ends, and I’ve been a walker of Thomaston streets all my life. Even now, I walk at least an hour a day through Thomaston’s different neighborhoods, where I’m recognized and, I hope and trust, respected in all of them. “One of these days you’re going to meet yourself either coming or going, Pop,” our son, also a lifelong resident of our town, often observes, and there’s a good deal of symbolic truth to this remark. Almost nowhere in Thomaston am I not within sight of a personal memory.

The self I meet coming and going, I confess, relentlessly unexceptional. I’m a large man, like my father, and the resemblance has always been a source of pleasure to me. I loved him more than I can say, so much that even now, many years after his death, it’s hard for me to hear, much less speak, a word against him. Still, there’s also something bittersweet about our resemblance. I am, I believe, an intelligent man, but I’ll admit this isn’t always the impression I convey to others. Over the course of a lifetime a man will overhear a fair number of remarks about himself and learn from them how very wide is the gulf between his public perception and the image he hopes to project. I’ve always known that there’s more going on inside me than finds its way into the world, but this is probably true of everyone. Who doesn’t regret that he isn’t more fully understood? I tend to be both self-conscious and reticent. Where others regret speaking in haste, wishing they could recall some unkind or ill-considered opinion, I more often have occasion to regret what I’ve not said. Worse, these regrets accumulate and become a kind of verbal dam, preventing utterance of any sort until the dam finally breaks and I blurt something with inappropriate urgency, the time for
that particular observation having long passed. As a result, until people get to know me, they often conclude that I’m slow, and in this I’m also like my father.

I don’t remember how old I was the first time I overheard somebody call Big Lou Lynch a buffoon, but it so surprised me that I looked the word up in the dictionary, convinced I’d somehow mistaken its meaning. This was probably the first time I recognized how deeply unkindness burrows and how helpless we are against it. At any rate, I’ve noticed that people who eventually come to like me often seem embarrassed to, almost as if they need to explain. Though I’ve been well and truly loved, perhaps more than I’ve deserved, my father is the only person in my life to love me uncritically, which may be why I find it impossible to be critical of him. In one other respect, I’m also my father’s son: we both are optimists. It is our nature to dwell upon our blessings. What’s given is to us more important than what’s withheld, or what’s given for a time and then taken away. Until he had to surrender it, too young, my father was glad to have his life, as I am to have mine.

THOUGH I GREW UP in Thomaston, my earliest memories are of living with my maternal grandparents in a tiny house three miles to the south, its backyard sloping down to the Cayoga Stream. When the winter trees were bare I could see the water sparkling from the upstairs windows, but I wasn’t allowed to play along the banks. My grandfather owned a car, and by the time I awoke in the bedroom I shared with my parents, he and my father had already left for work. I vaguely remember my mother being unhappy about living “in each other’s laps” and that we were saving for the day we could afford a flat of our own in town. With no other children nearby, I’d become a quiet, solitary child, and my mother was determined that I attend kindergarten in town and make friends. With a year of business school under her belt, she was confident she could get part-time work as a bookkeeper once I was in school.

We couldn’t have saved much money, because when the time came to enroll me in kindergarten, the place my parents rented was in Thomaston’s West End on Berman Court. There were only five houses on Berman, two on each side of the street and another—a three-story building—at the dead end where the land fell sharply away to the Cayoga Stream. I remember having a hard time understanding how this was the same river I could see from my grandparents’ house, which felt like a different world to me. My new bedroom window, in the back of the building, was impossibly high, and I remember being afraid of falling from it, down the steep bank and into the stream. Most of the houses in our new neighborhood were slapdash affairs that almost from the day of their construction began to slope and tilt dangerously, their chimneys sporting large fissures and sometimes toppling onto the roofs of their neighbors’ sloping porches. I remember, too, the dank chemical smell of the Cayoga itself, which always permeated the stairwell that led up to our rooms, an odor that was nothing like the overheated apartments, which were ripe with pungent cooking oils and unbathed pets kept too long indoors.
My father was a milkman. His dairy job had paid enough to support us when we lived with my grandparents, but not now, though I was unaware of this at the time. I was proud that everyone in Thomaston seemed to know and like my father, that no matter where we went people would toot their horns or call to him from across Division Street or want to shake his hand in the doorway of the barbershop. My mother, by contrast, lacked this great popularity, and though I loved her, I sometimes wondered why my father had married her. She was terribly thin and angular, and her eyebrows met in the middle of her forehead when she frowned, which was most of the time. Old photographs suggested that she had never been pretty. I don’t mean that she was homely, just the kind of girl you wouldn’t notice, and now that she was a woman people always seemed to be trying to place her. Whenever anyone offered the slightest hesitation, she would supply her name, as if she understood their predicament all too well. I thought it was a shame she didn’t have my father’s good-natured, jovial temperament, because at least that might have made some sort of impression.

After we moved to Berman Court, when my father went out on his milk route, my mother worked at home, keeping the books for several small local businesses, the extra income allowing my father the largesse for which, in those early days, he was well known. “Acting like a big wheel” was what my mother called his willingness to loan a dollar or buy a cup of coffee. I don’t think it occurred to me that we were poor, but my parents often disagreed about money. My father loved to buy things for a quarter or fifty cents at yard sales, items that he claimed were worth far more than he paid for them and that my mother regarded as worthless because we had no use for them. He’d buy a tire for a dollar if it still had tread on it, even though at the time we didn’t own a car. (The milk truck he drove wasn’t for personal use, but he had special permission to use it to buy groceries at the A&P when he finished his shift on Saturday morning.) “I know a guy’ll give me two, three bucks for that, easy,” he’d tell my mother in reference to the tire, and most of the time he was right. When he brought what she called junk home from yard sales, she’d take one look and say, “What in the world did you buy that for,” and he’d reply, “A quarter.” Nor could he resist a lottery ticket or a fifty-cent chance on a Rotary Club raffle, even though my mother insisted that these were “taxes on ignorance.” Winning, which he seemed to do a lot, allowed him to feel vindicated, even when what he won wasn’t something we needed or even wanted. “What if first prize had been a head cold?” my mother would ask when presented with the fishbowl of jelly beans he’d won by guessing how many it contained. “Would you have bought a ticket? You don’t even like jelly beans.” He just replied that he supposed he could learn to like them. In fact, he’d have nine hundred and seventy-three opportunities. “Besides,” he continued, “our Louie here likes jelly beans, don’t you?” And I said I did, though in truth I wasn’t overly fond of them. “Great,” my mother said. “Fifty dollars’ worth of cavities, minimum.” But it was true, my father was always winning things, and if I had to explain why our family was so fortunate, I’d have said it was due to my father’s luck. I felt lucky just standing next to him, confident that I, too, would come up a winner.

If my mother thought moving into town would guarantee me friends, she was mistaken. That first day of kindergarten, when I got my nickname, made me wary of
the other children, and a year after we’d moved to Berman Court I was still nearly as solitary as I’d been in the country at my grandparents’. I say “nearly” because I did have one friend, of a sort, in Bobby Marconi, whose family lived on the second floor of our building. His father worked nights as a desk clerk at the hotel but was trying to get on at the post office, where he filled in whenever a letter carrier got sick. Ours was, alas, mostly a walk-to-and-from-school sort of friendship. Once we arrived back at Berman Court we seldom saw each other until the following morning, and we never played together on weekends. On Sundays, of course, the Marconis attended Mount Carmel with the Italians, and we Lynches worshipped with the Irish of St. Francis. It was exasperating to have my only friend right there in the building and yet have so little access to him. My mother explained that the Marconis preferred to keep to themselves, and when I asked why, she said it was just the way they were. You couldn’t make people want friends, and we certainly couldn’t make the Marconis want us for friends.

Neither of these observations made much sense to me. My father always said you couldn’t have too many friends, so why would the Marconis consider them a liability, especially people as likable and interesting as us Lynches? But my mother explained that not everybody was like us. Other people went about things differently. It was our way—or my father’s, she said—to keep people abreast of what we were up to, especially when fortune smiled on us. If he won twenty dollars at a church raffle, he thought people should know. Somebody else, she concluded, might keep the lucky event a secret to ward off envy or requests for a small loan. To me, such logic was both new and disconcerting. Just before we’d moved to Berman Court, my grandparents had bought a television, perhaps as an inducement for us to remain with them. My father liked watching television almost as much as I did, and recently I’d overheard my parents talking about buying a used one for our flat. My father didn’t see why we couldn’t afford one, and my mother, who paid the bills and balanced the checkbook, did. I happened to know that the Marconis were also debating the same purchase, and I gave Bobby to understand that if we got ours first, we’d invite them up to watch our favorite shows. I made this offer, without consulting my parents, as a hedge against the possibility that they’d get one first, in which event we could watch with them until we could afford our own. Something like a television couldn’t help but draw people together had been my thinking, which I now understood to be flawed. Instead of opening their front door, it could in fact shut it tighter than before.

I got the distinct impression that, left to themselves, my mother and Mrs. Marconi might have been friends, like Bobby and me, but for some reason this was not allowed. Mrs. Marconi, a pale, nervous woman of Irish descent, seemed never to leave the apartment. When Bobby and I arrived home from school, we’d sometimes find our mothers in furtive conversation in the hall downstairs. Mrs. Marconi always had one of Bobby’s little brothers on her hip, and there was usually another small, liquid eye peering out from behind the cracked door, but when she saw Bobby and me, she quickly disappeared inside, as if she’d been doing something wrong and I might be a spy ready to report her indiscretion.
Being a child, I had a child’s intolerance of mystery and vagueness, so I kept after my mother relentlessly. Why couldn’t she and Mrs. Marconi be friends? Why was my own friendship with Bobby restricted to walking to and from school? Why couldn’t our families be friends? To which my mother responded, with yet more vagueness, that we had very different notions about how to go about doing things and therefore little in common. Little in common? Weren’t we mirror images of each other? My father was Irish, my mother Italian, the Marconis the reverse. When we first moved to Berman Court and met them I remember wondering if our families hadn’t somehow gotten tangled up. Mrs. Marconi had a softness about her that made her a better match for my father than the man she married, and I couldn’t help thinking she wouldn’t have been so nervous all the time if she lived with a man as good-natured as Big Lou Lynch. And while I wouldn’t have wished for this, my mother, a woman who knew her own mind and didn’t spook easily, seemed a better match for Mr. Marconi. That way, when they went to church at Mount Carmel and we went to St. Francis, everybody would be where they belonged. I was just a boy, of course, and it didn’t occur to me that had things been arranged in this fashion neither Bobby nor I would have existed. It just seemed like a more workable situation, and I was surprised nobody else had thought about it.

Gradually, I came to understand that the real reason Bobby and I couldn’t be better friends was that his father had something against mine. And since everybody liked my father, Mr. Marconi’s refusal to do so seemed willful and perverse. I studied him carefully every chance I got, hoping to understand what was wrong. He wasn’t nearly as large a man as my father, but he was compact and muscular, and he had a way of leaning slightly forward, his hands clenching into fists and then unclenching again, as if he had to remind himself not to be angry. On his forehead, just below the hairline, he had a purple birthmark that seemed to change in size and vividness, growing larger and darker when his fists were clenched than when he relaxed them. But what could he possibly have against my father? Of all the things I wanted to understand, this was the most urgent because it seemed the most inexplicable. It seemed to have something to do with the army. Mr. Marconi had served and my father hadn’t, and apparently he held it against him, though it was flat feet and not unwillingness or cowardice that kept my father out. He’d taken some pains to explain this to Mr. Marconi, who just smiled and said, “Funny how that works,” then claimed to know plenty of other flat-footed guys who’d managed to serve. “Too bad, anyhow,” he concluded. “We could’ve used a guy like you who knows the right way to do everything.”

“You’d think he was part of the Normandy invasion.” My mother snorted when my father told her about this conversation. From what Mrs. Marconi had said, by the time her husband had arrived in Europe the war was already over, which to my mother’s way of thinking explained why he was still fighting it. “Don’t you dare repeat that,” she said when she remembered I was in the room and taking it all in. “Bobby’s mother isn’t supposed to talk about the family, so I’m not supposed to know.”

Dressed in his postman’s uniform, Mr. Marconi did have a military bearing, and I half expected to look up one day and see him wearing a sidearm. According to my
mother he ran his family on a military model, with the emphasis on discipline. In our house it was my mother who was in charge of that, though there was little need of it. I’d never been a willful or disobedient child, and a reproachful look was enough to improve my conduct. Neither of my parents had ever raised a hand to me. Apparently at the Marconis it was different. Mr. Marconi alone handled discipline, and my mother feared it was often harsh. Could that be another reason he didn’t like my father, a man who spared the rod?

If I had a hard time understanding Mr. Marconi’s resentment, I wasn’t alone. My father couldn’t understand it either, and whenever they met in the hall, he was even friendlier than he was with other people. “Lou,” my mother said, “leave the man alone. If he doesn’t like you, he doesn’t like you.”

“What’d I ever do to him, that’s all I want to know. I never done nothing to him.”

“I know that, Lou,” my mother said. “Leave him alone anyway.”

But he couldn’t. Even I knew that. He kept an eye peeled and would waylay him by the mailboxes or in the hall, determined, I could tell, to be liked or know why he wasn’t. The subject he usually tried to introduce as an icebreaker was money and how much things cost anymore, that there seemed to be no end in sight and you had all you could do to keep up, never mind get ahead. These were subjects my father considered to be of universal appeal and easy enough for anybody to talk about and share as common ground. “What Tessa spent on winter clothes for our Louie this weekend?” he’d venture. “I couldn’t hardly believe it. And one kid’s all we got. With three, that’s gotta be rough.” Here he’d let his voice fall so Mr. Marconi could commiserate or, if he felt like it, compare notes about the cost of children’s coats and boots. I think my father suspected that Mr. Marconi, between his two jobs, made more money than he did at the dairy, but having three kids and another on the way, he figured, put them in pretty much the same boat, moneywise. Also, there were rumors the hotel was going to close. “I told Tessa she ain’t gotta pay Calloway’s prices,” he continued when Mr. Marconi declined to comment. “She could go down to Foreman’s for cheaper, but thinks cheaper’s more expensive in the long run, and I guess she’s right.” Actually, that wasn’t how he’d reacted the night before when he found out how much my winter clothes had cost, but now he’d slept on it, and I could tell spending all that money had become a source of pride. “Besides, if you’ve got the money, why shortchange your kids? If you ain’t got it, sure, that’s another thing, but if you do, why not spend the extra buck?”

“Because you might need it tomorrow,” Mr. Marconi finally said, pushing past my father and closing the door in his face, rather more forcefully, it seemed to me, than was necessary.

“Don’t always be bragging to that man,” my mother told him. “You know they dress those boys out of the thrift shop.”

“Well, what’s he spend their money on, then?” my father said.
“Lou, that’s none of our business. Leave him alone. He doesn’t like you.”

“I just wish I knew why, is all. I never done nothing to him.”

Which caused my mother to rub her temples.

About the only thing the Lynches and the Maronis did have in common was a determination to leave the West End as soon as we could afford to. My mother in particular saw Berman Court as temporary. She’d wanted to rent in the East End from the start, but having grown up at the end of the Depression, she was wary and said she preferred to not have something at all than to have it today and lose it tomorrow. She felt bad for Mrs. Marconi, who was always pregnant. With each new baby, my mother claimed, the poor woman was tethered to the West End that much more securely.

I remember knocking on the Marconis’ door late one afternoon and waiting in the hall for a long time. There were sounds inside, so I knew someone was home, someone, I sensed, was right on the other side of the door, listening and hoping whoever it was would go away. Only when I knocked a second time did Mrs. Marconi respond, her voice very near, “Who is it?” she wanted to know, her voice tremulous. “Bobby can’t come out,” she said once I’d identified myself, though I was there to return something my mother had borrowed the day before.

“That woman is terrified,” she said when I told her what had happened. But when I asked what Bobby’s mother might be afraid of, she claimed not to know. I didn’t believe her, and it frightened me to think some unnamed thing in our own building could scare a grown woman, and I wondered if my father could protect us from it.

ST. FRANCIS WAS Thomaston’s only parochial elementary school. After kindergarten my mother had been talked into enrolling me there by Father Gluck, our parish priest, and I suspect she also hoped—in vain—that my nickname wouldn’t follow me there. Bobby’s parents had reluctantly enrolled him in St. Francis in third grade because at Cayoga Elementary he’d fallen in with a group of rough boys and been suspended, more than once, for fighting, which particularly worried Mrs. Marconi. In one of their furtive hallway conversations, my mother may have suggested that St. Francis boys weren’t so combative, and that having Bobby there would be good for me, too. We could be friends and walk to and from school together. Mrs. Marconi liked that idea but didn’t think her husband would spend the extra money, so we were all surprised when she prevailed. My mother speculated afterward that Mr. Marconi may have been swayed by the fact that St. Francis boys wore uniforms, of which he heartily approved, believing that dress impacted behavior.

Cayoga Elementary had been a short block from Berman Court, but St. Francis was a half-dozen blocks farther, in the opposite direction. It was also on the other side of the Cayoga Stream, which we crossed, coming and going, by means of a narrow
footbridge. Both schools dismissed students by grade, ten minutes apart, lower grades first. If you were a first grader with a brother or sister in second or third grade, you were allowed to wait in the office until the higher grade was let out. Otherwise, you were to go straight home. The flaw in the system was that older kids in the public school were being let out at the same time as the younger ones from the parochial. St. Francis kids were already objects of scorn because we wore uniforms and were taught by nuns, and those who left by the front door often had to run a gauntlet of ridicule. For others of us, though, the most direct route home was out the back and across the small school yard, then out through a gap in the fence. From there we followed a path through the trees down the steep bank of the Cayoga Stream, crossed the footbridge and climbed up the far embankment. From there it was, for Bobby and me, three short blocks home to Berman Court.

The scary part of the journey was the bridge itself. Thanks to the depth of the ravine, it was visible from neither the school on one side nor the street on the other. The whole journey, down one bank and up the other, took only a minute, but if the public school boys arrived at the footbridge first, and no parents were around, St. Francis kids had to “pay a toll” in order to pass. The toll could be whatever you had: a penny, a marble, an old Necco Wafer. If you had nothing, or maybe just a broken pencil, you found yourself in a headlock and tossed over a hip and onto the hard ground and then laughed at as you raced toward safety back where you’d come from. Whenever Bobby Marconi stayed home from school, I made sure I had something for the toll.

That was the thing about Bobby: he never had to pay the toll, nor did I when I was with him. The boys collecting the toll were the very ones Bobby had gotten in trouble with the year before, so they all knew each other. Their leader, a kid named Jerzy Quinn who was a year older, had been suspended with Bobby, and for some reason that had made them cautious friends, as well as rivals. Jerzy liked to tease Bobby about being a wimpy Catholic who only hung out with girls anymore—a reference to my nickname, I knew immediately—and Bobby asked Jerzy if he wanted to be a singer like his father, a drunk who liked to sing at the top of his lungs before passing out in the gutter by the tannery.

The closest they ever came to actual hostilities was over me. At the beginning of the school year, the toll takers tried to shake me down, and one of them, Perry Kozlowski, put me in a headlock while the others went through my pockets. But Bobby said to leave me alone, that I was with him and didn’t have to pay. He didn’t question the authority of these boys to consider the bridge their own property, but did insist that I was exempt by virtue of our friendship. “Who says?” Perry wanted to know, as if there were rules governing such exemptions. They argued the fine points while I remained in the headlock, until Jerzy Quinn finally said, “Let him go. He’s not worth it.”

When they were gone I asked Bobby why he didn’t have to pay, because of course that puzzled me. But Bobby just shrugged, as if I’d asked him to explain all the laws of nature. “Some people just don’t have to, Luce,” he said. “Other people…” We both
knew what happened to other people and that I fell into that category. Which was one reason I was so glad to have Bobby’s friendship and also why, at the end of the school year, not long after Mr. Marconi got on full-time at the post office and they moved to the East End, I was so devastated.

The following year, with Bobby gone, I knew the public school boys would be on the lookout for me. Most days my grade got out on time, which meant I’d arrive at the bridge before they did, and once safely across I’d scramble up the bank and head for Berman Court. Sometimes, as I emerged from the trees and turned toward home, I’d see or hear them coming, hooting and jeering, a couple of blocks away, and if it was too obvious that I was hurrying, they’d laugh and yell “Run, Lucy, run!” and the words would make me do it. Then they laughed all the louder. We all seemed to understand that it was just a matter of time before my teacher would keep our class a crucial minute or two longer, or for some reason they themselves would get out early, and then there’d be a reckoning.

The day it finally happened, I had no one to blame but myself. I’d stayed late to help Sister Bernadette clap erasers, an honor, and when I started through the yard and along the path down to the stream, I caught a quick movement at the edge of the trees and thought I heard voices coming up from the green darkness below. I might, of course, have simply returned to the school and had Sister Bernadette call my mother to meet me, but as afraid as I was of the boys at the bridge, I was even more afraid of being a scaredy-cat. It was one thing to turn and hurry back to school after I’d seen the public school boys at the footbridge, a genuine threat, but it was another to run away from a shadow that might, for all I knew, be that of a first grader. My eraser duty had taken a good fifteen minutes, and then I’d talked with Sister Bernadette for a while, which meant the public school boys had probably come and gone by now. Or such was my reasoning as I continued along the path to the edge of the trees, where I stopped to peer down the bank into the darkness below, my head cocked, listening. There was the sound of the stream, of course, but was that all? Was some other utterance mixed in with or obscured by the burbling of the water?

I don’t know how long I stood there before starting warily down the path, the trees and the darkness closing in behind me. In the middle of the footbridge lay a workbook. Public school workbooks were different from ours, used year after year, filled in with pencil and then erased at year’s end, the answers still visible on the page, ghostlike, along with the checkmarks identifying incorrect responses. Was it possible for this workbook to be sitting there without its owner nearby? An urgent whisper slipped out of the trees. Still I stood transfixed, waiting, but it was quiet except for the sound of the water and the wind in the upper branches. Stepping onto the footbridge, I immediately heard a sound behind me and, turning, saw a grinning boy come out from behind a large oak to block my retreat. Ahead, two others materialized, then two more.

One was Jerzy Quinn, who grinned and said, “Hey there, Lucy-Lucy.”