

Lucy

Jane Bachman

IT WAS almost dark and very cold by the time school was out, but Lucy decided to walk home the long way, around the marsh and the lake. She didn't want company tonight. Sally would have been nice to have along, but she was tying her red wool scarf very carefully and making plans with Jim. That meant she wouldn't be ready to start. Sally talked a great deal anyway, more than was really necessary, Lucy thought.

She shifted her book and started down the sidewalk, half hoping that Sally wouldn't see her, half wishing that she would call. How satisfying to be able to say, "I'm meeting someone. I can't walk home with you tonight." But Sally would know it was a lie. She would know there wasn't anyone to visit on the lake road except maybe Pop Miles.

Sally was still chattering when Lucy turned the corner. It wasn't snowing, but the air was frosty, and Lucy tugged at her mittens. The cold rushed up her nose like peppermint, and her short, dark curls blew out around her brown scarf. She was free until tomorrow morning! She was away from the hot, noisy classroom and Miss Simpson's rasping voice—like a coal scuttle on brick, Lucy thought. She smiled inwardly. Outwardly she had learned to keep her mouth closed and her chin huddled in her collar. It saved explanation. It was easy to laugh at Miss Simpson and her pointed nose and blue-veined hands. But Miss Simpson was terrible at times. Oh, yes. She had been dreadful today. Lucy felt the prickly feeling in her chest again when she thought about it. She had missed four arithmetic problems and Miss Simpson frowned when she handed back the paper.

"Lucy George," she had whispered in a voice that shook, "you have missed the same problems again today. Don't you study, you silly child?"

Lucy could hear herself saying, "Yes, yes I do, and I can't understand them."

"Of course you can," came the voice. "You don't apply yourself. Do them again."

Oh, it was awful to hear her say it. Lucy's heart beat faster just thinking about it. She didn't care. Arithmetic problems were a bother . . . bother . . . bother. What difference did it make to Miss Simpson if she missed them? What difference to her? None—none at all.

Miss Simpson cared about keeping lines straight when they filed out at lunch time. And she insisted that you stay in after school if you were only one minute late. Yesterday morning, Lucy had hurried until she reached the school, and then she had to stop to talk with Pop, who was in town to get groceries, and so she had been late. Only two minutes. But she had to stay in, and you couldn't tell Miss

Simpson that you *had* to talk to Pop whenever you saw him no matter where it was or what time it was. Miss Simpson could not possibly understand.

Lucy suddenly felt very tired. Her eyes and shoulders ached, and she wished she didn't have to carry the book. Sally didn't have to study arithmetic, and she didn't mind standing in a straight line. Once Lucy had asked her why. Sally had opened her blue eyes wide and tossed her head.

"Because Miss Simpson wants us to. We're supposed to." Sally's life, thought Lucy, was very simple.

She left the road and stumbled over rocks and scrubby bushes to the marsh. It was still now, but a choked stream whispered at her feet. Stiffened cattails were bent until the spring, and brown seaweed lay matted and frozen along the banks. Far away a trail of mist was drawn across the low land. Gray sky was patched with white, and two wild ducks were gliding—dropping into a distant pond. Their call spread out across the grasses, but the marsh slumbered on. A timid sparrow clung to a willow branch above and then flipped its wings and flew.

Lucy walked on along the shore until the stream widened and the lake began. Little ripples caught at the beach, and the sand was cold and powdery underfoot. The lake would surely freeze tonight. Even the spring which bubbled and ran from Pop's house to the other side would not struggle long against the ice. But underneath it moved. Pop said it was never still—always pushing against its slippery ceiling. That was the way of the water. It never gave up. You never knew where the shore would crumble and lake would rush in. You never knew where the ice was solid. It might fool you and turn to dark splotches.

Lucy looked up the steep bank to where Pop Miles lived. Pop was an old man, past sixty, and he lived in an enormous brick house all by himself except for Kate, his cook and housekeeper. People said Pop was rich. Lucy couldn't tell. His house was pretty, and Kate always fixed hot chocolate when Lucy visited, but Pop's clothes were old. He had worn the same maroon sweater for as long as Lucy could remember, and his shoes, though polished, were cracked and water-soaked from walking on the beach.

Lucy scrambled up over the terraces, and there was Pop, standing on the doorstep. When Lucy reached the door he took her book, laid it on the hall table, out of sight, and closed the door.

"Kate has chocolate. We saw you coming," he said, and winked.

Lucy smiled. It was very warm, and through the door to the left she could see a fire burning in the fireplace.

"It was such a nice evening, I thought I'd come to see you," Lucy said, and pulled off her coat.

"Most would think it's too cold and dark to be out," Pop chuckled. "I think so."

"You wouldn't be cold if you were bundled up," Lucy laughed.

"Yes, I would." The old man's eyes twinkled and he led the way into the darkening living room. Books and papers were scattered about in profusion around the desk and on the rose rug. A cup of chocolate sat on the desk. The old man motioned to it.

"That's yours. It's good. I had a cup earlier." The cup was big and heavy and white with brown leaves and acorns on it, and the chocolate did taste good. Lucy dropped down on the hearth to drink it.

"What did you see on your walk today?" Pop asked, and lowered himself gently into an enormous brown leather chair.

That, thought Lucy, was one of the very nicest things about Pop. He didn't always ask how school was or what she'd learned.

"Ducks," she said, "and a sparrow, and I think the lake will freeze tonight."

"Do you?" Pop asked. "Kate said the same thing this morning."

"Don't you think so?" Lucy asked, doubtful now.

"Maybe, but it doesn't look quite ready to me. A little too wild and windy."

"Probably the spring won't freeze then for a long time," Lucy said, sipping her chocolate. "Sometimes I wish it didn't have to be caught. It ought to be able to run forever."

"It does, Lucy," Pop said. "It runs always underneath."

"But you can't see it. How do you know?" Lucy wondered.

"The ice doesn't freeze smooth over the spring. You've seen ripples on it."

"But it looks like the spring is frozen into the ice."

"No, Lucy, it's there underneath. It's something that you feel is there. Haven't you ever felt something inside you that you couldn't see?"

"Yes," breathed Lucy, "Yes, often."

"That spring has been running for years. And it never dries up because it has something to accomplish," Pop said, and got up to poke the fire.

"It couldn't stop even if it wanted to?" Lucy asked.

"No, not even if it wanted to."

"It must get tired of having to bubble all day."

"But its waters are renewed. It bubbles fresh water, Lucy."

She sipped her chocolate and rocked back and forth. The end of a log tumbled into the fire with a hiss.

"I don't think it minds, Lucy," Pop said and walked to the wide window overlooking the lake. "You will see someday. You will understand."

"I think I know how it feels," she whispered, feeling an inexplicable sadness.

She ran to stand beside Pop. Across the lake a faint moon showed in the gray sky. She didn't feel tired any more. She slipped her hand into his and stood, thinking.