BROOKLYN WAS MINE

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What is it then between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?
Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not,
I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine . . .

—WALT WHITMAN, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*

READING LUCY

Jennifer Egan

LAST SPRING I formed a brief, powerful friendship with a woman named Lucille Kolkin. She was a Brooklynite, like me. For two months, Lucy and I spent a couple of hours together at the Brooklyn Historical Society every Wednesday and Friday, while my son was at preschool in the neighborhood. I say two months, but in Lucy's life it was actually five—from April to September 1944, when she moved to California and we lost touch.

We met for professional reasons. I was researching a novel I'm writing about a woman who worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard during World War II, and Lucy actually *worked* at the navy yard for almost two years, as a mechanic in the shipfitting shop. When she started, in the fall of 1942, she was Lucille Gewirtz, but within a year she'd met Alfred Kolkin, from the mechanical shop, and married him after a brief courtship she once jokingly referred to as "Maidenhood to Marriage in Three Easy Months." The speed doesn't surprise me; Lucy was passionate. It's one of the things I love about her.

By the time I got to know her personally, I'd already spent time with the lecture notes she took at navy yard shipfitting school. She wrote in blue pen in a small loose-leaf binder, defining countless acronyms (WL=waterline; AE=after end; FE=forward end) and neatly diagramming ships in cross-section. Since I, too, was trying to learn the basics of battleships, I began copying down much of what Lucy had copied, including details like: "Construction is started at midship and continued on both sides of it. Balances weight." But I also encountered flashes of the life attached to the notes I was cribbing from:

Buy–Bag
Shoes
Bras
~~*Stock*~~. ~~*Dye*~~

Fix–~~suit~~
gray dress
blue suit
stocks

From cleaners—coat

Who was this woman whose to-do lists looked so much like mine? I knew that the historical society had a collection of correspondence between Lucy and her husband, beginning in April 1944, when he joined the navy. I

requested the first group of letters she'd written to Alfred when he left for boot camp in Sampson, New York. That was when our friendship began.

Lucy wrote to Alfred almost daily—often on the streetcar she took from Twentieth Avenue in Bensonhurst, where she ate supper at her mother's house before beginning her night shift at the navy yard. "We're approaching Pacific St. again—(wish I had a longer ride)" was a typical sign-off, accompanied by endearments: "Oodles of love and about 7 little kisses," or "So I'll throw in another kiss and just an inchy winchy pinch on the aft end." She was wildly in love with her husband. "You're a huge success, fella," she wrote to him on May 4, 1944. "Not only I—but the other thousand girls in the yard think you're handsome. See, I've been sporting a new picture of you and in my characteristically 'proud of my husband' feeling, no one can escape seeing it."

On an undated letter in May, she kissed the paper she was writing on in a spectacular shade of pink lipstick. It was shocking to see the impression of her lips, every crease still visible after sixty-two years, as if she'd left it ten minutes before.

Lucy described herself as a shipfitter 3/c, meaning third class, ("buzz: soon, to be 2/c I think," she told Alfred in June), and she often seemed to have the aid of a "helper," also female. A shipfitter fabricates and lays out the metal structural parts of a ship—a job that it would have been laughable to think of a woman performing before the war. But as male employees at the yard were drafted or enlisted,

someone had to replace them; the Brooklyn Navy Yard was the largest shipbuilding facility in the world during World War II. It built seventeen battleships and repaired five thousand, including Allied ships from all over the world. And by January 1945, there were 4,657 women at the yard, working in nearly every phase of shipbuilding and repair.

I was hungry for detailed descriptions of Lucy's shipfitting work, but as is often the case when someone talks to a fellow "insider," her remarks about work were mostly in passing: "stenciled 120 pieces for a job" or "I was put back on the flow this afternoon—and I didn't like it nohow." She liked being the timekeeper, which apparently happened every two weeks and allowed her to stay in the office and write letters to Alfred. She complained often of sore feet (later mitigated by a pair of rubber-soled shoes) and described her hands as "kind of scratched." In one of her longest descriptions of actual work, from July 17, she wrote: "First it's 4, then it's 1, then it's 6. No, I ain't talking about babies—or even the time. You see, I'm a shipfitter and I'm making up some more kingposts and booms. 'Make up 4.' So I start making up the fittings for four ships. 'Cancel 3, they're duplications.' So I put some fittings for three ships away in case I get the job again. Then I make up the rest of the fittings—enough for 1 ship. 'New order. Make up six.' So I start pc#1, pc#2 all over again. It's not a bad job otherwise." She included a diagram of a kingpost, with an arrow indicating a "5 × 5 H Beam about 9' lg."

When it came to life in the navy yard *around* the job

itself, Lucy was superb. "I just learned of a wonderful way to lose friends—and get a lot of laughs—or do you already know the funnel trick?" she wrote in an undated letter. "Near closing time this morning, the boys said that for 10c a try a fellow could put a half dollar on his fore-head, a funnel in his pants and if he got the 50c piece into the funnel by bending his head it was his. Well of course when he put his head back to balance the coin, a container of water was poured into the funnel. Some level of humor!"

She had a particular interest in union organizing (she referred occasionally to "union friends") and also in the plight of "negroes," whom she viewed with great sympathy. Here's an anecdote from her letter of May 3:

"Yesterday, Minnie, a negro tacker who has been in the yard as long as I and interested in becoming a fitter, became disgusted and signed up for welding school. Another victory for Haack [Lucy's supervisor] and his ilk. Poor gal—she hates welding and is all upset. She knows she's not doing the right thing by giving up the fight but she insists there's nothing else to do. A couple of negro girls and I were trying to talk her out of it. But she persists in the idea that not only does she have to fight as a woman, but as a negro. She was practically in tears . . . She's a former teacher and math genius—and Gee! Butch, it's such a God damn shame."

Four days later, she wrote: "Just learned Minnie (remember?) is not quitting shipfitting. Our little talk with her took effect."

Amid the news, anecdotes, and political and cultural observations that Lucy somehow managed to pack into these daily missives, I learned the basics of her life: she and Alfred were Jewish. Lucy had gone to college—at Hunter—while Alfred had not, which occasioned from his wife occasional pep talks about how little college really mattered: "I went to college. So what. I look for a job and people say, 'Yes, yes but what can you do?' 'Nuttin' say I.'" She also had a habit of footnoting words whose meanings Alfred might not know—like *querulous*—and providing definitions. In one letter she included a lengthy tutorial on how to read music. The instruction apparently went both ways; in another letter, she asked Alfred for directions on how to wire a room.

I found these letters deeply absorbing; not only did hours pass without my noticing, so that I often found myself huffing, flustered, to pick up my son, but often it felt like sixty-two *years* had passed without my noticing—such was the ringing immediacy of Lucy's voice. In some ways our worlds felt close together: we walked the same streets (I live in Fort Greene, a few blocks from the navy yard); we both worked hard and struggled to find time for practical necessities like cleaning and shopping. Like me, Lucy hated buying clothes; "I'll brand myself, I'll go before a firing squad—anything," she wrote to Alfred in April. "Only I won't try on another dress." She loved movies and live performances, which in her case meant Duke Ellington, Paul Draper, Danny Kaye's *Up in Arms*, and countless

other movies. And she often reported on her avid reading: Dorothy Parker, Howard Fast, Boris Voyetekhov's *The Last Days of Sevastopol*.

Of course, Lucy was much younger than I am—in her midtwenties, in the early phase of her adult life. Part of the pleasure of reading her letters was wondering how her life would turn out; would Alfred return to Brooklyn, or would they put a down payment on a house in San Francisco, as Lucy fantasized? Would she continue to work, or leave that behind for motherhood? Would she have children? Would her love for Alfred remain as heedless as it was in this first year? I mused with an odd sense that these answers couldn't be known—as if Lucy's life, like mine, were still a thing in motion, with many outcomes uncertain. That's how close she seemed.

Sometimes, while crossing the street or jogging over the Brooklyn Bridge, I would have the thought that I might actually *see* Lucy, not as she was now—however that might be—but the Lucy of 1944: wisecracking, a talker, drinking a strawberry malted. I was dying to hear her speaking voice (I imagined it deep and a little crackly) and to see what she looked like beyond that fuchsia print of her lips. All of Brooklyn seemed full of her.

On May 7, Lucy wrote, "Butchie—guess what! I had a dream last night about our having a baby—a couple of months old—cute + blond—and dressed in a regular basque shirt + shorts. You were diapering him and I suggested it was about time you taught me how to diaper him,

etc, etc. I should know better than to disclose my dreams, but it was too nice to keep to myself. Anyway, I guess the dream belonged to you too."

After reading that sentence, I stood up suddenly, walked to one of the historical society computers and typed "Lucille Kolkin" into Google. Within a second or two, I was reading her obituary. She'd died suddenly, in 1997, at age seventy-eight. She'd had two daughters, two grandchildren, and lived in New York. After fifty-three years of marriage, Alfred had survived her.

I returned to my seat, shaken. It was one of those moments when technology crushingly outpaces cognitive reach; I couldn't seem to make the transition from the handwritten pages in front of me, full of blindness and hope, to the obituary on the screen. It was several minutes before I resumed reading Lucy's letters, and when I did, it was at a slightly treacherous remove, as if I were withholding information from her—like faking surprise at an outcome you already know.

After that, I found Lucy's letters poignant in a way that they hadn't seemed before. As she prattled to Alfred about bicycling in Prospect Park or rubbing bicarbonate of soda on the sunburn she'd gotten on a trip to Coney Island with her girlfriends, it would cross my mind that I knew the time and place of the death that awaited her. And I felt a corollary awareness as I walked the Brooklyn streets, holding my little sons' hands; how old would they be when I died? Would they have had children of their own? How

would they remember me? Lying in bed with my husband, the big tree swaying outside, I thought about Lucy's words to Alfred: "the glorious blossoms on the tree facing our window—that is the tree in Brooklyn. The last thing I say good-morning to before sleeping." It made me eerily conscious of a point of view from which our lives would look quaint, and a long time ago.

Meanwhile, in 1944, events in Lucy's life were rapidly unfolding: Alfred began radio technician training in Chicago, and Lucy gave up the little apartment they had shared and moved in with her mother. There was much speculation about where Alfred might be stationed next, and the news came in August 1944: he was moving to a naval base in Del Monte, California. "The news of your new destination is not too bad," Lucy wrote to him. "I understand the climate there is very much like heaven . . . Perhaps I can go to the Yard in that state—altho it's about 150 miles from where you'll be. They work on 8 hour shifts there—and I imagine I'll be able to see you every week-end."

Two days later, she deemed the California Navy Yard "no good—too far away," but shortly after that, she revived the idea of a transfer. "I'm pretty certain I could get a transfer to the Calif. Navy Yard," she wrote on August 6. "If you can't sleep out and the Yard is within a 150 mile radius—I almost think it pays to get a transfer. The Yard is near San Fran.—a nice place to live—and 150 miles is really not too far to travel. What do you think?"

The reaction from Alfred must have been cool, because

six days later, Lucy wrote, "Butch, do you really object if I feel like you? After all, you wanted to enlist even tho it meant leaving me. Well, I feel I have an important job too. And I don't feel like dropping everything and working in Del Monte just now—especially since I'll hardly be able to see you anyway. But if I work in San Fran. I can continue the work I'm doing and be able to see you besides."

I already knew the outcome of this debate from the biographical note accompanying the letters: Lucy would follow Alfred to Del Monte and work as a waitress. There would be no letters for almost a year, although they would begin again when Alfred shipped out in 1945. Still, as I read, I found myself mentally exhorting her the other way, as if the decision still hung in the balance, as if I could yank her, physically, from her time into mine. *Go to the yard,* I imagined telling her. *Savor this fluke of independence before the clamp of 1950s domesticity closes around you. Bank some more skills to capitalize on when the sexual revolution hits in twenty years. Please, Lucy, get the transfer! Go to San Francisco. I grew up there; it's gorgeous.*

The resolution came three days later:

". . . went to see my doctor—first time in about 5 weeks," she wrote, apparently referring to a therapist. "I was discussing my confused ideas about going to Calif. And thru association we discovered why I was confused—but my sub-conscious seems bent on going. Ain't this silly talk? But I like it. And so I'm still going. I plan to leave about the middle of September. Are you happy?"

The remainder of this section of Lucy's correspondence was mostly consumed with the details of her departure: packing with her girlfriends, the decision of whether to go by Pullman (expensive) or coach; the good-bye presents she was given by the women she worked with at the navy yard (books); the composition of her luggage. She mentioned a referral from the navy yard that she could present to the San Francisco Navy Yard, should she choose to. On September 5, on her way to Chicago—the first leg of her cross-country train trip—she wrote: "I showed some of your pictures to one of the girls on the train. She's seventeen and thought, 'you're a dream.' Yeah? Not for long, Butch. Soon you'll be a reality and then we'll both be happy."

Then, the letters stop. In the first days without her raucous writing voice and her panoramic gaze, I felt a little lost. I found myself contemplating tracking down some of her living relatives—her two daughters and maybe Alfred, if he was still alive—so I could talk to them about the rest of her life: the time between age twenty-six, where I'd left her, and seventy-eight. But that seemed a strange expenditure of time and energy, given that I was supposed to be researching the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In the end I settled on reading some of Alfred's letters to Lucy, beginning at the same time that hers had begun, in April of 1944. And as soon as I began reading, I felt relief: Alfred was a hoot. He had all of Lucy's humor and intelligence; his riotous account of learning to swim in navy boot camp made me laugh out loud. I'd conjured Alfred as a faceless 1950s

drone, but I should have trusted Lucy—she would never have picked a guy like that. Soon after beginning Alfred's letters, I felt myself begin letting go, preparing to leave these two extraordinary people to live out their lives together.

The last letter I read of Alfred's involved plans for his furlough to Brooklyn in early May:

"I'm looking forward to those five days together Lucy," he wrote. "I want us to cram a lot of things into it. It'll be easy if we plan it a little bit . . .

"I'll take you swimming in Hotel St. George Pool and you can see what progress I've made. I'll show you how a sailor rows a boat. I'll show you what a 'boot' can do to a good home-cooked meal. And you'll see that I can dance as flatfootedly as ever.

"You'll see!"