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THE NARROW LAND

Written by **Christine Dwyer Hickey**

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THE NARROW LAND

CHRISTINE DWYER HICKEY



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TNL_setting.indd 3 09/11/2018 15:38

1

SHE IS WALKING THROUGH an art gallery. A typical city gallery of doorless rooms, one leading into the next. The rooms square, light-washed, high ceilinged. There is no one else in the gallery, which seems a little odd – not even a guard standing at a wall. And something else that seems odd – there are no paintings. Yet the rooms seem prepared for paintings; there are hooks along the walls and here and there a picture-light cradles an empty space. The hooks are unusual, she notes in passing; double-barred and the colour of old ivory, they are set right into the wall.

At first the light dazzles. But as she walks further into the gallery, it begins to dim. The rooms too are becoming smaller. She only notices this when she happens to turn and look back the way she has come. The gradual shift in size is apparent then, as if the rooms are nesting into one another. She can see all the way back to the first room and, beyond that, across a black and white tiled floor to the large double doors that divide the gallery from the street outside. There is a glimpse of the street through the doors' glass panels: part of a sign on the side of a truck, the top knot of a fire hydrant, a nun's veiled head gliding by. She knows the street somehow – the nun, the fire hydrant, the large red *& Sons* sign on the truck – yet can't recall standing out on the street, nor coming to the door, pushing it open and walking across the chessboard floor. But anyhow, here she is.

She almost misses the last room. Much smaller than the others, the entrance is narrow and low in the wall like the door of a cupboard. She has to bend her head and turn sideways to get through. When she looks in, there is complete darkness, but when she steps down into the room, a column of light breaks

TNL_setting.indd 105 09/11/2018 15:38

open and points itself into the far corner where a painting hangs. She knows this at once: it is her painting, from seed to completion – she was the one who brought it into being. She covers her mouth with one hand and with the other her heart. A small gush of tears comes into her eyes. It is the most beautiful painting she has ever seen. Oh joy, she whispers into her hand, oh joy, oh life.

To think that, after all these years, it has been here all along, trapped in the dark of a secluded room, waiting, just waiting for her to come find it.

She dries her tears with her hands, then dries her hands in her skirt before carefully placing them on the sides of the frame. She tries to ease it away from the wall, but the picture resists. She begins to tug at it. She tugs harder and harder. She stops pulling then and attempts to look behind the picture. But the picture is tight to the wall, and now there is a low growling noise coming from behind it.

The light in the room snaps off. There is a strange smell, an animal smell. In the dark the growling noise deepens. The sound of an animal that is angry and, at the same time, frightened. She hears the thud of a heart, feels something wet and slick on her neck and chest. For a terrifying moment she thinks the animal is slobbering on her, getting ready to attack. But then she wakes and finds that both the smell and the noise, they are coming from her, and that the sweat on her skin is her own.

She lies in the dark, her mind running over the dream, each detail vivid, apart from the one detail that really matters – the painting itself. She can remember the weight of it when she first tried to ease it away from the wall and how solid and cool the frame had felt in her hands. She can still feel the rush of love that had come over her when she first looked upon it. The sense of achievement. And, oh, the pride! But as to what was inside the frame – subject matter, paint, colour, light – all that has now gone from her.

She turns on her side and studies her husband's long, broad back, the pyjama stripes like broken bars in this light. She brings the flat of her hand close to his back and wonders if she will tell him about her dream in the morning. Her hand hovers for a moment, the heat that comes out of him like smouldering coal.

TNL_setting.indd 106 09/11/2018 15:38

She imagines herself explaining it to him (And what do you know but… And then? And my heart so full of *when*…), the little grunts he would allow across the breakfast table until finally she asks, 'What do you make of all that?' A shrugged one-liner as he pushes his plate away: 'It was only a dream' or 'I don't see that it had to mean anything in par-tic-u-lar.'

Before returning to his newspaper or his book or his post at the north window for his usual morning scrutiny of all the thin air in South Truro.

She sits up in bed, pulls her pillow up behind her and sips water from a glass on the bedside table. He shifts his shoulder then, glancing over it, asks in a mumble if she is all right.

'Yes, yes, it's nothing,' she says, 'you go on back to sleep.'

She stares into the room. The closet doors, the chair, the bureau beyond the fog of darkness like land ahoy. The hulk of his coat hanging from an unseen hook, as though it's standing up on its own.

'Do you remember the bears in Yellowstone Park?' she says aloud. But already he's gone back to sleep.

She continues to sip on the water and, as she does so, comes to a decision: tomorrow she will pay a visit to Mrs Sultz. For weeks, she has been toying with the notion, and now it is final. Mrs Sultz, tomorrow – a Sunday visit – what could be nicer? And she will go alone, even if he offers to drive her there. He will be surprised by her refusal, pleased too – an uninterrupted afternoon is just what he needs right now, a chance to do some work on that Orleans picture. She will ask him to drive her only as far as the bus. At the other end, she can call a cab to take her the rest of the way.

Or she could drive herself there – and why in hell not? It's her automobile too – she has just as much right to use it as he does. He will object – that much is certain – and when he does she will neither fight nor reason with him. She will wait for him to go for a walk or to become immersed in his painting and beyond noticing. Then she will simply take it (leaving a note pinned to the garage door, of course, in case he gets it into his head to go calling the police).

For a moment she sees herself driving along the Old County Road. No one beside or behind her to bark out criticism or unnecessary directions (not so

TNL_setting.indd 107 09/11/2018 15:38

close to the ditch; not so middle of the road; truck coming up! Kid on a bicycle! Watch out for the bridge at the next bend). As if she were driving with her eyes shut tight. To be all alone on the open road, maybe a little radio music to keep her company – how invigorating would that be? Fields and trees and wild-flowers flickering by, and the window rolled down to three-quarter mast, the taste of salt air coming over it. And Mrs Sultz – she would be so proud of her.

'You drove here? All by yourself – *you*?' she would tut before saying, as she always does when utterly astonished, 'Well, now, isn't that *something*?'

All the way there on her own. How many miles to Hyannis – how many after that to reach the sanatorium, along how many back roads? And then all the way home again. The highway busy with day trippers at the fall of evening and the light fading before her on the road. And supposing the visit doesn't go so well? Driving home alone and upset – how many miles from the sanatorium to Hyannis, how many from Hyannis to home…?

And now she sees herself clinging to the wheel, waiting at an intersection to cross over the highway, twilight slipping into darkness and the Sunday evening traffic at this time of the year, headlights cat-swiping her eyes. Swipe after swipe while she waits and she waits…

She will ask him to drive her to the bus.

The important thing is to get there. To make it up with Mrs Sultz, spend an afternoon with her best, and only, truly honest friend. It is certain to be a nice sanatorium – Mrs Sultz is not poorly off. They will sit outside; garden furniture on a smooth green lawn. Iced coffee under a tree. She could tell her all about the dream. Mrs Sultz has always been interested in that sort of thing: the psychological slant, as she calls it.

She would tell her other things too: about the women on the beach, the boy who gave her his cookies, the invitations to the Kaplan parties – one of which is already past, the other yet to come. And how she had intended going to that first one, yes, even on her own – because she hadn't bothered telling him, knowing only too well what he would say. She had bought a whole basket of peaches to take along, had put on her lipstick, ironed her best dress. She'd been about to put the dress on, then go out and ask him to drive her there. At the same time, she had been prepared to walk should he fail to show willing. And

TNL_setting.indd 108 09/11/2018 15:38

then, at the very last minute, she had sat down on the side of the bed and couldn't seem to bring herself to stand up again.

But why? Mrs Sultz would ask her. Why on earth didn't you go? And she would be able to explain it somehow and know that Mrs Sultz would understand. She simply hadn't been able to face it. She was too tired: too tired to fight with him to come along, and too tired to go it alone.

She had always been able to speak frankly to Mrs Sultz – say things she wouldn't dream of saying to another soul on earth. Talk to her about the past, tell her things about her secret self. And she had known that whatever was said, and despite the falling out, Mrs Sultz could be trusted to take it with her to the grave.

But what if Mrs Sultz has turned, if she finds her like she found that old friend of her mother's, Mrs Neeson? Demented and sitting up in bed swaying like a swamp tree? And what if she doesn't recognize her? Or worse – if she *does* recognize her and, when she sees her standing there, stops rocking and starts yelling instead? Get that woman out of here, she is a liar. She lied about her age when she married and she lied to her husband. Get her out of here – she was not, I said *not*, a virgin when she married!

She ought not to have told her. It's just the sort of thing an elderly woman would pull out of the bag. Mrs Sultz was not like most women of her background but even so – there had been no need to go telling her all that. There had been no need to tell her a lot of other things too. Like her regret at not having a child. But she only told because Mrs Sultz had asked. Do you regret? It was during the war; Mrs Sultz had brought her clamming. They had been laughing at her clumsy first efforts and then, suddenly, the question. Do you regret?

She had said: well, my age may have been against me, of course. But my husband doesn't care for children, not one little bit, and we are both so dedicated to our work… Yes, but do you regret? She would never have admitted it to anyone else. She had barely even admitted it to herself until the moment Mrs Sultz had asked.

She looks around the room, neither dark nor light: dusk before dawn. She can see the mirror on the bureau now, her possessions laid out on top of it like grown-up toys. Her mother's jewellery case; the small rose vase that had

TNL_setting.indd 109 09/11/2018 15:38

belonged to her grandmother. The powder tin she'd bought in Mexico. The box that held a necklace he bought her, one long ago Christmas.

When she is gone, all will be gone. No one to say: this necklace was my mother's; my great-grandmother owned that rose vase. Her name gone too: both single and married, no one to carry the can on either side. His paintings, of course – they will last and bear his name. But paintings are not flesh and blood, they are not the sound of a voice, the expression in an eye. And besides, he won't be cold in the grave before they are reduced to commodities: buy-and-sell trophies for rich men's walls.

What would their life have been if it had all worked out differently, if there had been a child? An only child – there would have been time for only one. Still, the difference one child would have made – where and how one lives for a start. His mother would have died a grandmother; his sister would now be an aunt. An artistic child, it was bound to have been, both sides being so inclined. But plenty of children turn out to be duds and so often in this life the rules of algebra seem to apply: two pluses do not a minus make. Mrs Sultz and her late husband good and true both. Yet the son? Insolent face and avaricious eye, always on the lookout for—

She hears herself gasp as the memory hits her – of course, he is dead: Matthew Sultz is dead. He died in the war. A prisoner-of-war. How could she have forgotten that? Died before he had a chance to settle into his own particular manhood. They told Mrs Sultz he hadn't suffered – of course, they would always say that. God knows what sort of death he really had. And God knows what sort of a shrivelled up and mean little soul she must have to think such thoughts about a poor dead boy – a boy who gave his life for his country?

She feels the shame burning her face, the swift awkward beat of her heart.

She will not sleep now.

She gets out of bed, goes into the bathroom, washes her face and spends a long time and a lot of tooth powder cleaning the sour taste from her mouth. Soon it will be sunrise. She could go out for a walk and catch it in the act. She could watch it break like an egg and pour itself all over the sea and the sand and her hands and her body until she is standing like a gaudy trinket on the shore. She

TNL_setting.indd 110 09/11/2018 15:38

will wait for the light to pale out and purify, and then she will begin walking along the seashore to Ryder Beach, cutting home by the hogsback hills. She will be gone a couple of hours at least. (He will start to worry – and let him!) While she walks she will try not to think: to allow the new light of day and the sea to wash her thoughts away, the grass and the trees to brush the dirt from the corners. That way, she may be able to forget her mean thoughts about poor Matty while, at the same time, a space in her memory may be found for that painting from her dream to nudge through.

Back in the bedroom, she begins to gather her clothes. In the half-light his coat on the back of the door no longer looks like a bear. It is simply a coat – she can even make out the flecks in the wool.

She lifts the sleeve and rubs it against her face. Rough, dense, heavy, an outrageous expense when first he bought it – oh, but a coat that has proved itself over time. They had such a fight over it while packing to come here. He said, 'I won't need it, I'll be done before the weather turns.'

The coat, like the child in King Solomon's judgement, had been tugged between them; she'd flung it into the trunk, he'd pulled it back out again. Finally she wore him down – he sulked as far as the Connecticut Turnpike.

But she had known how it would be – a difficult recovery, artistically as well as physically. It was always going to be a slow summer and she had known, too, that he would die rather than go back to New York empty-handed. And now it was coming to summer's end with nothing to show for it, and this coat he had no need of in New York would soon become his best friend.

In Yellowstone Park, he'd been afraid of the bears. Mama bears taking a stroll with their cubs, other tourists feeding them picnic scraps through the half-open windows of their automobiles. She had longed to embrace them. Such a strange longing it had been, warm and at the same time lonely. A little like love. Love and loneliness and, again, disappointment. She'd asked him to pull over so she could pet the bears but he'd refused absolutely. And, yes, she had behaved like a child then, putting her feet up on the dash, knowing he would swat them off again. She had scratched his hand when he put it back on the wheel. Scratched and screamed at him, a long wordless scream. The shock on his face

TNL_setting.indd 111 09/11/2018 15:38

when she did that. Then came the tears, silent tears. She'd turned away from him, face to the window, overwhelmed by a sort of grief. After a moment, he had pulled over and switched off the gas. Then, taking her in his arms, he held her there until the tears ran out.

Embarrassed after her outburst, she said, 'I guess I was having a Lady Chatterley moment – you know, when she wept over the newborn chicks?'

'Newborn chicks are one thing,' he said. 'Mama bear – well, she's quite another.'

She sits down on the side of the bed, her clothes in a pile beside her, and starts to lift the hem of her nightie over her knees. He mutters.

'Whas madder – can't sleep?'

'I'm going out for a walk,' she says.

He lifts his head from the pillow, turns and blinks at her.

'Do you remember the bears?' she asks him.

'The Bears? No – who are they?'

'The Yellowstone Park bears – do you remember them?'

He turns away again, lays his head back down on the pillow.

'Remember, remember,' he says, 'why do you always have to remember? Look out at the stars instead. Or even better, go back to sleep.'

'There are no stars,' she says, 'it's almost morning.'

Then, letting go of her nightie, she climbs back into bed where she lays her face against the warm, damp patch on the back of his pyjamas and, in a moment, falls back to sleep.

When she wakes, he is already up and dressed. His pyjamas lying sideways on the chair and a smell of recent coffee on the air. The house silent but not empty – it's the wrong kind of silence for that.

She sees her clothes hanging off the side of the bed, her sweater on the floor, and she remembers her plan to visit Mrs Sultz then. She is not so sure about the visit now and has just started talking herself out of it when he comes to the doorway.

He stands looking at her for a few seconds while he screws the head of a

TNL_setting.indd 112 09/11/2018 15:38

brush into a paint rag. 'I'm going to buy a newspaper,' he says then. 'Need anything while I'm out?'

'I don't know – do we?'

'Groceries might be a good idea.'

'Fine.'

'Well, what should I—?'

'Whatever you like. Surprise me, why don't you? Just because I'm the woman – does it mean that I have to make all these decisions?'

'No, it's because you're the fussy eater.'

'So you say. Oh, if you wouldn't mind checking the bus times while you're out.'

'Going somewhere?'

'I'm thinking of going to Hyannis, since you ask.'

He looks at her, surprised and amused. And now, like it or not, she *has t*o go to Hyannis.

'To pay a visit to Mrs Sultz,' she says. 'I was thinking if there's a lunchtime bus or a little later, I don't really mind once I'm there before three. You could check the return times too, so you'll know when to meet me.'

He nods and then says, 'Want me to drive you?'

'Certainly not! You better stay here and work on that picture, don't you think? But thank you for the offer. How is it coming along, anyway?'

He backs out of the doorway and she can hear his footsteps go first to his worktable, then into the kitchen and now cross the floor to the door.

She calls out after him, 'I said – how is it coming along?'

A moment's hesitation and then: 'I'm not sure that it is.'

'Well, what does your instinct tell you?'

'That it's a piece of tripe.'

'Oh. Can I at least see it?'

'No.'

'No?'

'Not yet, anyway. I want to leave it lie undisturbed for a while.'

And then the door clicks and he is gone.

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TNL_setting.indd 113 09/11/2018 15:38

She waits a few minutes before getting up and walking barefoot through the house. A dull sky and heavy clouded and now she remembers there was talk of a rainstorm. From the back window she sees the tail-end of the automobile turn at the gate-post and duck out of sight.

She comes back on her steps and stops at the easel. The easel is turned away, facing west towards the bay, so that if she wants to look at it she has to walk right in and around it. She does this and, now facing the easel, takes a few steps back and then stops.

He has it all down in blue. She moves closer to the picture and leans into it. Then, holding her index finger an inch or so from the canvas, she begins to trace over the lines: the oval of the garage sign, the vertical pole holding it up, the circles of the tyre display beneath it, the stop light with its three hooded eyes just behind it. She brings her finger across the street and continues to trace over the lines, straight and curved, rectangled and triangled. She tries to work it all out: the foliage along the horizon line, the thumbprint of an automobile heading into the vanishing point, the broad tilt of the road.

She turns to his worktable and begins looking through sketches, spreading them out, lifting one and then another for closer inspection. Treetops, shops, houses, stove-shaped chimney pot, canopies, garage sign, horizon line. Vanishing point.

She puts the sketches back the way she has found them and stays for a moment without looking at the picture on the easel. She finds she is unable to do that now, look at it face to face. Not because she is overwhelmed by it – which can occasionally happen – nor is she deafened by the clash of envy and pride, admiration and resentment – which can also happen. The truth is she has had her doubts about this picture right from the start. She sees nothing to fear and nothing to ponder in this rendition of an intersection at Main Street, Orleans. It is a bland picture, so far anyhow. No, worse than bland – it is dead.

She comes back into the bedroom, pulls her best skirt from the closet, lays it out on the bed and then fumbles in her mother's jewellery case until a silver brooch comes to hand.

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TNL_setting.indd 114 09/11/2018 15:38

The sky has darkened to a charcoal grey by now and looks about ready to rip wide open. As she comes to the window to take a closer look, her eye is caught by movement down by the garage. Two boys standing there. The boys appear to be having some kind of dispute: the taller stands square with his arms folded to his chest, the stockier one, in between stomping around, points up to the house like he's shooting an arrow. She comes outdoors, walks round the house and waits at the top of the steps.

The taller boy sees her immediately and drops his folded arms. The other boy turns and now he sees her too. They both somewhat reluctantly begin to make their way towards her. As they climb the steps, she starts to recognize them: Mrs Kaplan's grandson, and the taller is the boy who gave her his cookies. She can't recall their names and so she calls out to them.

'Well, hello, you two – and what brings you here?'

Mrs Kaplan's grandson increases his speed and, arriving a little breathlessly, says, 'Good morning, ma'am, I'm sorry to disturb you. I'm Richie in case you don't remember me. Richie Kaplan, you know. We're here because my grandma, that is Mrs Kaplan, she asked—'

The other boy rushes ahead of him. 'I've come to see Arthur,' he says.

'Who is—? Oh, you mean the cat, Arthur?'

'Yes, the cat.'

She feels the first smack of a large raindrop on the back of her hand and, wiping it away, looks at the sky.

She says, 'But he's dead.'

'I know *that*,' the boy says, 'but you said…'

'What did I say?'

'You said you'd love me to see the painting you did of him.'

And now she feels another drop on her arm, and the first rain stains on the wooden rail.

'Yes, I did say that – didn't I? Well, I'm glad you've come. And I'm glad it's only you two, after all. I looked down and saw two people hanging around the back of our garage and didn't know what to think!'

Mrs Kaplan's grandson's face shows a healthy blush. She can't make out if he's embarrassed or annoyed.

TNL_setting.indd 115 09/11/2018 15:38

'He thought you lived down there,' he says. 'He wouldn't listen when I tried telling him – I mean, who lives in a gar—?'

'What in the world made you think that?' she says to the boy.

The boy looks down, pawing the step with his foot like a horse. 'It looks like a house, I mean with the roof and everything.'

'Pretty small for a house,' Richie says, rolling his eyes.

'Well, she's pretty small too.'

Richie turns and glares at him.

She tries not to smile. 'And who do you think lives here then, in this house?' she asks.

'That man,' the boy says.

'That man?' She laughs. 'Why, that's just what I call him sometimes – you know, in my head. That man!'

Another drop of rain, fat and cold, this time hits her right on the face.

'Don't you think you boys better come inside before the rain—?' she begins, and then it all rushes out like corn from a slit sack.

She turns and begins to run; Mrs Kaplan's grandson falls in behind her. When she gets to the corner, she glances back and the tall boy is still standing on the steps, rain streaming down his hair and face.

'What are you waiting for then?' she shouts back at him. 'You'll get soaked right through.'

'Are you alone in there?' he shouts back.

'Yes, there's only me.'

'Where's the man?'

'He's gone out. Come on, I promise, there's no one in.'

The boy nods and then runs in behind her.

They duck into the house and she slams the door, the rain pelting off it as if it's trying to get in after them. The sound of it bashing off the windows and walls, the roof.

Richie shouts, 'Oh no, all my clothes are wet!'

The other boy laughs and shakes his hair out like he's a dog.

'Oh, it's only summer rain,' she yells through the noise, 'won't harm you at all.'

TNL_setting.indd 116 09/11/2018 15:38

Then the rain suddenly cuts out. And the house is quiet again. She goes into the closet and takes three towels out, throwing one each at the boys.

Richie pats his towel on his face and carefully dries first his hands, then his legs. The other boy swipes the towel over his face in one go and then drops it on the back of a chair. She takes her own towel and, much like Richie, closes her eyes and pats her face dry. When she opens her eyes Richie is pulling things out of his pocket and laying them on the kitchen table: a rescue inhaler, a pack of bubblegum and a small white envelope.

'At least *this* didn't get wet,' he says and begins shoving the envelope at her.

'What is it?' she says, now drying her ponytail.

'I don't know, ma'am, well, I sort of do – oh, I didn't look inside it or anything like that, but anyhow my grandma, she said to be sure to put it right in your hand.'

'They want you to come to a party on Labor Day Weekend,' the other boy says. He is staring around the house with his mouth wide open.

'You like the place?' she asks and tries again but fails again to remember his name.

The boy nods and then, pointing up at the loft, asks, 'What is that up there?'

'That's a loft.'

'It doesn't look like a loft.'

'Well, what do you think it looks like?'

'I don't know. Maybe where the preacher stands?'

'The preacher! Oh yes, we have one of those right here, let me tell you. Now, you wait here while I go search for Arthur.'

As she rummages through the loft she hears their loud whispers.

'Didn't anybody ever teach you anything about manners? Anything at all?' the Richie boy says.

'What'd I do now?'

'Staring at everything that way. And you're supposed to call her *ma'am* when you speak to her. And I don't think you ought to have said that thing about her being, you know, a small person.'

'But she is.'

She pulls the painting free from a pile-up of old canvases and, feeling giddy

TNL_setting.indd 117 09/11/2018 15:38

suddenly, ducks behind the wall of the loft and pops the painting up over it, shouting: 'Miaow!'

The taller boy bursts out laughing and says, 'What are you now, Arthur, a Jack-in-the-box or somethin'?'

She takes the painting away and shows her own face. Mrs Kaplan's grandson is looking a little pained while the other boy continues to grin up at her.

She is on her way down the stairs from the loft when she hears the double click of the Dutch door opening and then Richie's voice saying: 'Oh hello, sir, I hope we're not disturbing you but, you see, my grandma, she—'

This is immediately followed by some sort of a scuffle and the sound of the door opening again followed by the click of it closing.

She hurries down the last few stairs. Richie is standing goggle-eyed and her husband, with two hefty grocery bags in his arms, is staring at the door. 'What was that all about?' he asks.

The boy is halfway down the wooden steps by the time she reaches the top of them.

'Hey,' she calls out, and then, as a name jumps out of her memory, 'Hey, Vince, come back here – where are you going?'

The boy turns for a second, a look of genuine panic on his face.

'Oh, now, don't say you're going to make me run after you – that would be too cruel of you, really, at my age!'

He turns as if to run again, but as he does, his knees seem to get caught up in one another and he stumbles, falls forward before coming to a twisted halt halfway down the steps.

She leans the painting of Arthur against a dry patch on the wall of the house, then hurries down the steps after him. The boy is hugging his knee, his eyes scrunched right back into his face. The knee, bleeding and badly scratched, is stuccoed in grit, there are more scratch marks along his shin, his elbow is skinned and the side of his forearm is also marked with scratches and beads of blood.

TNL_setting.indd 118 09/11/2018 15:38

'Oh, you poor boy, oh oh. Are you all right? Oh, how terrible. Oh, Vince, what have you done? Can you get up? Do you think you can do that for me?'

He reaches out for the banister, but his arm is not long enough. She lifts her head to call her husband and finds him already coming down the steps with Richie close behind him.

'It's going to be all right now, Vince, my husband will carry you back up to the house and—'

'No!' the boy whimpers and folds himself over.

'Why, Vince, whatever is the matter with you?'

She looks back up at her husband and shrugs.

'Maybe it would be better if I were to drive Richie back to his grandmother's house,' he says. 'He can bring her back here.'

'Richie, would that be all right with you?' she asks. 'If my husband takes you back to fetch your grandma; I can stay here with Vince till you get back?'

'Vince? Well sure, ma'am, that would be fine, but the thing is, she's not there. Nobody is. Grandma and my mom went with Aunt Katherine to Doctor Tom's and then they are all having lunch with Mrs Grant, you know, the English lady, and even Rosetta, well, she had to go out too, left us to fix our own lunch and everything, or at least we have to fix it as soon as we get back from delivering this message.' Richie licks his lips and holds the envelope out for a second before lowering it again.

'What are we to do?' she says to her husband.

He comes down and sits on the step above the boy. The boy begins shaking his head in small rapid-fire movements. He stays sitting for a few moments without moving or looking at the boy and then he quietly asks, 'You know who this lady is?'

'Sure,' the boy mumbles, 'she's Mrs Aitch.'

'Mrs Aitch? Okay.'

'I told him, sir, that's not her real name,' Richie says, 'but he won't listen.'

'Well, in that case, I'm Mr Aitch, this lady's husband. Now, tell me, do you think Mrs Aitch is scared of me?'

The boy shakes his head.

'And do you think that's because maybe I'm not such a bad fellow after all?'

TNL_setting.indd 119 09/11/2018 15:38

'I don't know, I guess…' the boy says.

'Well, the way I see it, son, you don't have much of a choice. We don't have a telephone and so we can't call a doctor. And we can't leave you on the steps out here, not with the rain about ready to start over. Supposing a hurricane comes? You'll be blown clear away. But what we do need to do is figure out if you're hurt – you know, in case you need to go to the hospital. Now, Richie can't carry you and my wife here, well, she certainly can't carry you, so you're stuck with me, I'm afraid. I can promise to be gentle as I possibly can, and as soon as we get you back up there and in the house, my wife can take over, check you out and fix you up – how does that sound?'

The boy, without looking at him, gives a small nod.

'I'm going to check a few things first,' he says and then puts his hand on the boy's leg, 'because if you've broken anything then we can't move you – you understand? All right, so how about this? And this? Okay, now, can you bend your knee, can you do that for me? Good, that's really good. You certainly are brave.'

The boy continues to rapidly nod his head.

'Okay, now, I want you to put your arms around my neck, that's it, good. And now I'm going to lift you up. All right? One and two and three. Here we go, that's it. Going up! All the way to the top floor. Now. That wasn't so bad, was it?'

The boy begins counting under his breath.

'That's it,' he says, 'you just keep on counting. By the time you reach a hundred we'll have you back in the house, sitting comfortably, and that's a promise.'

She watches him carry the boy up the steps. The boy like a young injured animal up in his arms. The delicate awkwardness. The knots of his bony knees and his thin legs hanging over the precipice of her husband's arms. The most robust part of him seems to be his injury, the dark patch of scratches and blood like a fabric on his skin. A fragile thing, a boy of that age – you only really notice it when he stops moving around. Her husband, though, is not fragile at all and appears to be a much younger man, suddenly strong and capable, carrying the boy up the steps. And the boy's head snug on his chest.

TNL_setting.indd 120 09/11/2018 15:38

She recalls an evening, a long time ago, the first or maybe second summer in this house, when he carried her up the steps that way and it was her head on his chest. A beautiful day in September it had been. They had been out painting. He had left her to her own little spot and driven off to find one of his own. By the time he returned, the day had chilled into autumn. She'd only been wearing a thin cotton dress. He hadn't known the roads so well back then and had lost his way in the twilight. She was shivering, frozen right through. 'Even your hair feels cold,' he had said when he put his hand on it.

It seems funny to have shared the experience with a boy she hardly knows. To see his head lie where her head had lain, his legs dangle as hers had once done over her husband's strong arms.

She follows behind them; at the top of the steps, she picks up the painting of Arthur and hugs it to her chest.

In the studio, he places the boy on the high stool and she puts Arthur down and goes into the kitchen to put water on to boil. When she comes back, he is telling the boy about the first-aid course he did during the war. He doesn't bother to say that they both did the course, but that she was the only one to see it through to the end. He is holding the boy by the ankle and folding his leg back and forward.

'Just checking the hinges,' he says to her or the boy – she can't be certain. But in any case, they both seem to have forgotten that she was supposed to be taking over as soon as they got back to the house. She stands next to Richie and watches.

Her husband is now holding the boy by the elbow, moving his arm in and out. The boy is studying his face as if he's trying to memorize it. He stops doing that after a moment and begins looking at his surroundings: the easel, the worktable, the big window. Then he examines the high stool he is sitting on and, poking the cushion tied onto it, asks, 'How come there's a cushion tied on here?'

'Oh that? That was my wife's idea.'

'Why?'

'That's to make sitting more comfortable. I'm not supposed to stand for very long when I'm painting. But I always forget and stand up anyway.'

TNL_setting.indd 121 09/11/2018 15:38

'How come?'

'How come what?'

'You're not supposed to stand?'

'It hurts when I do.'

The boy nods and looks around a little more, then he comes back to him and says, 'You said it would take a hundred seconds to get from the steps to in here.'

'How many did it take?'

'One hundred and seventy-nine.'

'Well, then I guess I owe you seventy-nine cents. A cent a second – that seem fair to you?'

The boy gives a half-grin and she feels a slight twinge in her chest.

'You stopped being scared of me now?' her husband asks.

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'Nothing broken,' her husband says, finally addressing her. 'I think he just needs patching up. A glass of orange juice, a few cookies. You like orange juice? I just brought some home. We don't have any ice-cream, I'm sorry to say, but we can get some when I drive you boys back. We can see my wife off at the bus stop first, if you'd like that.'

'Where is she going?' he asks.

'Hyannis, I believe.'

The boy looks over at her then. 'Why are you going to Hyannis?'

'Well, to visit a friend.'

'Do you have to go today? Can't you do it some other time?'

'Of course, I don't *have* to go.'

'So you'll stay?' he says, his voice bright and full of hope.

'Well, I suppose. Now that the rain appears to be starting again… Oh, I don't like the bus when it rains. You just can't see a thing out the windows – they get so dirty. And *stuffy* – my goodness. So, no, I don't have to go today. I can wait till tomorrow. After all, we have guests. The least I could do is stay and make them some lunch.'

Across the room, the boy sends her a smile and such a happy smile. 'Is she really your wife?' he says to her husband.

TNL_setting.indd 122 09/11/2018 15:38

'Why – you thinking of proposing?' he asks.

'No. I just— Well, she seems a little young for you, is all.'

She laughs, claps her hands and says, 'Oh, you are the lambiest boy!'

As she turns to go back to the kitchen and fetch the hot water, she sees Richie standing there, looking a little dejected, the envelope still clutched in his hand.

'Would you like me to take that envelope now, Richie?' she asks, and he jumps to attention and hands it to her. She puts it down on the table next to the little bunch of things he left there.

'Do you suffer from asthma, Richie?'

'Well, yeah, I guess, sort of.'

'Oh now, be sure to remember your rescue inhaler, you might need it.'

He follows her out to the stove, talking behind her. 'Oh, I never use it really. Not for a long while, and not usually here – although sometimes in the fall – but mostly when I get it, it's in the city or if I get a chest cold and a few years ago after my father, you know, I had to go to a clinic in the mountains but no, not really. I should grow out of it soon, that's what my doctor says.'

'Oh well, that's good news.'

'My mom, though, she makes me carry it with me. You know, just in case.'

'Good idea,' she says.

'Oh yes, because, you see, when we were in the clinic, somebody died because they went out without their rescue inhaler and she gets scared since my— Well, you know, she just gets more scared about everything and makes me carry it.'

'Better to be safe,' she says and takes a bowl down from the shelf. She begins to fill it with hot water while Richie continues.

'And when I go to my new school next month, I have to take two rescue inhalers with me. One has to stay with the nurse and I keep the other, you know, in case I lose it.'

'Uh-huh,' she says and carries the bowl back into the studio with Richie at her heels. 'Yes, well, thank you, Richie, for giving me this invitation. Although, I should say we are not really partygoers. My husband doesn't like to stay up too late.'

TNL_setting.indd 123 09/11/2018 15:38

'Oh, it wouldn't have to be too late,' Richie says. 'It's a day-time party. People will come and go all day. You don't even have to stay for supper if you're too tired. That's what Grandma said to Aunt Katherine, anyhow – you go lie down any time you want. Aunt Katherine is sick, you see, she gets awfully tired.'

'Yes, I know, your grandmother told me.'

'So if you're tired, ma'am, then—'

'Well, we'll see,' she says, glancing at her husband who has removed himself from the conversation.

She puts the hot water down on the worktable. 'If you could bring the first-aid box, please, Richie? You'll find it in the bathroom, right through there, just behind the door. Once we have Vince all fixed up, you can help me to make lunch, if you like.'

'Vince?' Richie squeals. 'Why do you keep calling him Vince?'

'Isn't that his name?' she asks.

'No, did he tell you that it was? Because, you know, sometimes he just— Well, I don't like to say it when he's hurt and everything.'

'Oh no, he didn't tell me a thing,' she says. 'I was mistaken, that's all. He just reminds me of someone I know called Vince – that must be what put it in my head.'

Her husband looks down at the boy. 'And what is your name, son?' he asks.

'Micha,' the boy says.

'Micha?'

'Michael, I mean – my name is Michael.'

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THEY HAVE TO PARK at the end of a lane and walk the rest of the way to get to Mrs Kaplan's house. Mrs Kaplan's automobile is parked on one side, and there's another small convertible parked right behind it. She walks ahead with Richie. He follows behind with the boy in his arms.

The lane narrows and rises as they approach the house, a stand of red cedar trees on one side. The ground beneath her feet rain-damp and red, staining Richie's sneakers. As they reach the house, she sees a woman sitting on an

TNL_setting.indd 124 09/11/2018 15:38

upstairs verandah, the crown of her hat showing over the balustrade. Richie sees the woman too and begins to yell: 'Aunt Katherine, Aunt Katherine. He's hurt, Michael is hurt, he fell down all these steps and his leg is cut up and…'

Then Richie's feet pound up the porch steps; he flips off his sneakers and charges through the front door.

The woman on the verandah stands up, leans over the rail and looks down at her. 'Oh, hello,' she says, 'it's you again.'

'Well, yes, I guess it is…' she says.

'We met at Mrs Grant's house – a couple of weeks ago, am I right?'

She takes off her hat to show her face.

'Oh, why of course, you're Mrs Kaplan's daughter.'

'Katherine.'

'Yes, Katherine.'

Katherine smiles lazily at her, a pale, pretty face, long brown hair, tired-looking eyes as if she has just woken up or is about to fall asleep. 'My mother is inside—' she begins and then looks right past her and asks, 'Is he all right?'

She turns and sees her husband behind her, standing staring up at the girl on the balcony as if he can't understand what it is that she's asking.

'Michael, is he all right?' the girl asks again.

'Oh yes,' she finally answers on his behalf. 'He's a little stiff but no real damage. We fixed him up. He had a tumble, but there was no need for stitches or anything too terrible. I imagine he'll be back on his feet by tomorrow.'

'You look biblical standing there,' Katherine says, again looking over her head, 'you know, like Moses bringing his only son to be sacrificed.'

Again her husband doesn't say anything and again she speaks for him.

'I think you may mean Isaac. He was the one who sacrificed his son.'

'Oh yes, so he did! I'm always getting those guys mixed up.'

She gives a slow, lopsided smile and then moves away from the verandah and disappears through a French window into the house where Richie's voice is waiting.

Her husband begins to move again. The door to the house opens. Mrs Kaplan comes rushing through with a small Mexican woman fussing and clucking behind her.

TNL_setting.indd 125 09/11/2018 15:38

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IN THE MORNING, SHE sets out again to visit Mrs Sultz. He stands by the door waiting while she does a little last-minute fidgeting: hair, brooch on her blouse, now the interior of her pocketbook, coins – yes, dollars – yes, folded scrap of paper for the cab driver when she gets to Hyannis.

'You don't want to miss your bus,' he calls out to her.

She folds a sweater into her shopping bag and she rolls last week's copy of the *New Yorker* into the side of it, then the bag of crackers in case her stomach starts fussing on the bus, along with a box of chocolate candies for Mrs Sultz. Now the pocketbook where she can easily find it and, finally, a nest of four fat peaches, which she gently lays on top of the sweater.

'You don't want to miss it…' he calls.

She turns on her heel and comes out through the kitchen singing, 'Yes, yes, I'm ready to go, ready to go.'

'Oh!' he says when he sees her.

'Is that oh because I look so nice or because I really *am* ready?'

'Both, I guess,' he says, and with his hand softly on the small of her back, he steers her through the door.

He says it again as they come out of the lane onto the road where she suggests they could pick up the mail on the way to the bus. 'Well, if you're serious about catching that bus… I can pick the mail up on the way back.'

And again, when she suggests he might pull over when they get to Depot Road so she can see if that nice egg woman has managed to get her hens to lay: 'She'll keep you talking and what if the bus…'

They are coming up to the turn for Mill Pond Road when they see the two boys walking ahead. Michael, with his bandaged knee, limping a little while Richie, a couple of yards ahead of him, is plodding along on the end of the dog leash, the dog, on the other end of it, straining. And she thinks: poor Richie, everyone trying to get away from him, even his dog.

'Pull over,' she says. 'I want to ask about his leg.'

As they approach, the two faces turn – Michael's curious then pleased; Richie's startled then utterly confused.

'Oh, pull over,' she says, waving out at the boys.

TNL_setting.indd 126 09/11/2018 15:38

'I am pulling over, just not here in the middle of the road – there's a verge up ahead.'

She sticks her head out the window and yells, 'There's a verge up ahead, we'll wait for you there.'

He pulls over and they wait for the boys to catch up. It's only then she notices, on the bend further up the road, Richie's mother and another woman sitting on a low stone wall, smoking cigarettes.

'That's her, look – no, don't look – sitting up there on the wall.'

'Who – who is it that I'm not to look at?'

'Richie's mother. Mrs Kaplan's daughter-in-law, oh, what's her name? I can't stand that I keep forgetting names – you know? Olivia! That's it, Olivia.'

'Yes, I see her now.'

'Has she seen us?'

'I don't think so.'

'Who's that with her – is it the other one? The daughter who's sick – Katherine, isn't that her name?'

'No.'

'Oh, it must be.'

'It's not her,' he says, 'and how do you know she's sick?'

'Mrs Kaplan told me. That day in Orleans. When you off were chasing that picture – when you abandoned me for hours.'

'Oh, we're back to that, are we?'

'I must say, I don't like her, I don't like her at all.'

'Who, Katherine?'

'Oh no, she's fine. A little tipsy, though, yesterday – didn't you think? No, I mean, Olivia. Richie's mother. And as for that friend of hers! On the make, if you ask me. Oh, I know she apologized and everything.'

'Who, the friend?'

'No, Olivia, of course. But it was the *way* she did it – or the reason, I should say. She strikes me as one of those women, you know, the vulture type. She wouldn't mind getting her shiny red claws into you, I can tell you that. Can't we just back up to the boys?'

'I can't back up here,' he says.

TNL_setting.indd 127 09/11/2018 15:38

'Well, why not, for heaven's sake?'

'It's much too dangerous.'

'Well, can't you make a turn in the road then?'

'If I try that, they will definitely see us. Look, they're going to see us no matter what we do, so we may as well get it over with.'

'You're such an old stick – we could easily back up.'

'Or, I know,' he says, 'how about we slip out the door, crawl around to that field there, then edge along it Indian-style to the pond and wade back through it… That way, they'll never see us?'

'Oh, you are so *funny*.'

She turns in her seat and looks back towards the boys. Richie, red-faced, has stopped now and is pulling the dog with all his might, although the dog, head poked into a clump of roadside grass, clearly has other ideas. And now Michael, with a brisk and determined limp, is coming up the rear and passing him out.

'You know,' she begins, 'I think I may know why that boy was so scared of you.'

'You do?'

'He thinks you're a soldier.'

'I'm a little old for a soldier.'

'A German soldier – that's where he's from, you know, Germany. I bet he thinks you're an officer. I bet that's it.'

'Oh, so I've been promoted?'

'An SS officer. A Nazi. Well, why wouldn't he? You have the height, the right colouring – I can just see you in uniform.'

'That is not funny in the least,' he says.

'No, it certainly is not, the poor boy, going through all that just to end up with a neighbour who bears a remarkable—'

'Looks like we've been spotted by your friends,' he says.

She turns back around and, through the windshield, there's Richie's mother standing now, smoothing out the back of her dress with one hand and with the other giving a little wave. She sees now that the other woman is Miss Staines, taking a few last hasty pulls from her cigarette before twisting it into the stones on the wall.

TNL_setting.indd 128 09/11/2018 15:38

'I think she may have been medicated,' he says.

'Who or what are you talking about now?'

'The girl, Katherine, yesterday. She's sick – isn't she? I think that's probably what it was.'

They come to the automobile like curious cattle: the two boys from behind, the two women approaching from the front. The boys – and she can't help being pleased by this – come directly to her window. As for the women – they make straight for her husband. Miss Staines holds back a little, while Richie's mother dives right in. He opens the door and stands out on the road with his 'Good morning, ladies.'

On her side of the automobile Richie is reciting a thank-you speech – for all the help yesterday, the pancakes for lunch, the ride home afterwards.

Whereas on the far side of the automobile it's 'Oh, I can't tell you what an honour it is to finally meet you. Very exciting – isn't that so, Annette? Oh, excuse me, this is my friend, Miss Staines.'

'Oh, please call me Annette,' she says and, shaking his hand, simpers. 'How do you do.'

Michael shoves his face into the window frame. 'Where are you goin'?' he asks her. 'Mrs Aitch, where are you goin'?'

'What? Oh, to the bus stop. I'm going to visit that friend.'

'Can we come too?'

'Certainly not, she's in a sanatorium. How's that leg doing?'

'Pretty good. It only hurts if I kneel.'

'Well, you'd better not say your prayers for a day or two.'

The boy laughs.

'Is that funny?' she asks.

'You're funny,' he says and puts his hand on her arm, startling her.

'We saw your retrospective in New York,' Annette is now saying, 'went up on the train specially and, oh my…'

Richie is still talking. This time it's about his grandmother and somebody called Doctor Tom who came last night to take a look at Michael's leg.

'Oh yes?' she says to Richie. 'Well, isn't that nice?'

TNL_setting.indd 129 09/11/2018 15:38

'Thank you,' her husband is saying, 'kind of you to say so.'

'And I thought the best…' Richie's mother says. And, 'Oh yes,' Annette interjects, 'but my absolute favourite was…'

While Richie earnestly continues, 'And he said to Grandma that the dressing on Michael's leg was as fine a job as he'd ever seen and probably even better than he could have done himself.'

'Who said – your grandmother?'

'No! Doctor Tom, of course.'

'Oh yes, Doctor Tom, of course.'

Richie carries on – about what, she has no idea. Michael's hand, still on the sleeve of her blouse, has lifted a pinch of the material and is contentedly rubbing it between his finger and thumb.

On the far side of the automobile she can hear her husband's voice, polite and happy – why is it so happy? The long, flighty laugh of Richie's mother, the short, hoarse bark of her weather-beaten friend. And Richie's eyes still goggling and his mouth still moving:

'Excuse me, Richie,' she says to him and, abruptly turning away, leans across the driver's seat to call up to her husband. 'Shouldn't we be getting a move on? After all, I don't want to miss my bus, now do I?'

Olivia steps up to the open door, bends in with her sugar-sweet smile. 'I was just saying to your husband that we are so grateful for your kindness yesterday. If it wasn't for you both, well, I can't imagine what might have happened.'

'If it wasn't for us, it wouldn't have happened in the first place,' she says. 'The boys came to visit us – remember? To deliver the invitation.'

'Oh yes, of course. But, well—' Olivia laughs and then changes the subject to the weather – a topic she no doubt considers more suited to the wives of great men.

'Such a beautiful day and after all that rain! Though at least the hurricane didn't show up. But the rain, my goodness. Lying in bed last night listening to it, I felt sure we would wake to find the house floating like a ship out on the bay this morning.'

Olivia waits for her to laugh at the little joke – and let her wait, she thinks

TNL_setting.indd 130 09/11/2018 15:38

and stares her out. Olivia finally breaks and says, 'Well, we better let you catch your bus.'

She steps back from the door to allow the driver to lower himself in.

But Olivia is not done. She puts her hand on the top of the door and shows her girlish dimples. 'You are both heroes in our house, anyhow. I hope you know that.'

And they both look up at her standing there clutching the driver's door and it seems like neither of them can think of a thing to say.

Until Michael's head comes wriggling in through the passenger window and says loudly into the interior, 'Mr Aitch, can we come with you? Can we come wave Mrs Aitch goodbye?'

Richie's mother turns swiftly away from the door, both her voice and her step suddenly crisp, and makes her way round to Michael.

'Oh now, really, Michael! That's pushing it a little far – don't you think?'

Michael steps back from the window, his face full of sudden shame.

'After all, these good people had you boys for most of yesterday afternoon. You can't impose on people, you know – you have to *wait* to be invited.'

'Well, he's invited now,' she says, leaning the side of her head out the window. 'I'd love to have the boys wave me off – if the driver doesn't object.'

'No, he does not,' her husband says. 'Be happy to take them along. I have to run a few errands on the way home, but I can drop them off after that.'

She leans her arm over her seat and opens the back door. 'You heard him, boys, hop in.'

'What about the dog, Mom?' Richie says. 'Will you take him?'

Olivia takes the dog from Richie. 'I certainly will. We can't have Buster leave half of himself behind in this nice clean automobile. Bad enough he has your grandmother's car looking like a feathered nest. Honestly!'

And now she comes to the passenger window, billowing perfume in at her. The same perfume she would have billowed a moment ago at her husband.

'We really do hope you'll come to our party on Labor Day Weekend. My mother-in-law said not to force it, she knows how busy you are, but anyhow, I can't seem to help myself. It would be lovely to see you both there. It's my husband's anniversary, you see, and this is the first year that we will be cele-

TNL_setting.indd 131 09/11/2018 15:38

brating his life rather than mourning his passing. If you can spare the time of course.'

'Well, now, that's very kind of you, but we're not here on vacation, you know, we are here to work! Both of us. I'm an artist too, as you know, and we have a lot of catching up—'

She looks at her husband, expecting him to back her up. But his eye, half-smiling, is on Olivia leaning in the passenger window. 'Oh, I'm sure we could manage an hour or so,' he says.

Olivia beams. Mrs Staines through the windshield beams. The boys climb into the back seat yakking like magpies.

'Oh, how wonderful,' Olivia says. 'Well, we certainly look forward to seeing you there. But, of course, we are sure to run into each other before then – the party's not for another couple of weeks.'

And then, gracefully retreating, she issues a sharp tongue click at the dog, who immediately comes to heel.

When she gets out, she sees the bus pulling in to the stop. She looks at her watch – ten minutes to go. Then she leans back in to him. 'Well, I guess I didn't miss it after all,' she says. 'I even have time to buy a newspaper. So you won't have to be stuck with me all afternoon – won't that be nice?'

'Please give Mrs Sultz my regards,' he says.

The boys get out of the automobile but he stays put. They walk, one each side of her, towards the newsagent's, Richie lagging behind when an elderly man greets him and again when a woman waiting to meet someone off the bus stops to ask after his grandmother. She walks ahead with Michael.

'How come the picture was all in blue?' Michael asks as they wait to pay for the newspaper.

'What picture?'

'The one from yesterday, how come he painted it all blue?'

'The painting on the easel? Oh, the real colours get added in later. He'll probably do them today.'

'And will he put the lady in then?'

'What lady?'

TNL_setting.indd 132 09/11/2018 15:38

'The lady in the green dress. I saw her there.'

'You did? What was she like?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, what age was she then?'

He shrugs.

'Well, *who* did she look most like then – your grandmother or Richie's mom or even me maybe?'

'Oh,' Michael says, 'I get it now. She looked like Miss Staines – you know, Annette? She looked like her, I guess. Only a little shorter.'

'And what was she doing?'

'She came out of the dress shop and looked down the street like she was waiting for someone, then she went back in again – I saw her from the gas station.'

She pays for the newspaper and they come back out to Richie, who is standing near the stop watching the driver unload cartons and bags from the belly of the bus.

When they come up beside him she looks at Michael and says, 'When you go back to my husband, be sure to remind him about the lady in the green dress. Did you speak to her, Michael? Did you get to see her up close?'

'She gave me those cookies. And then I gave them to you.'

'So you did. And very nice cookies they were too.'

She puts her foot on the first of the bus's metal steps. 'Be sure to tell him she looked like she was waiting for someone. And you tell him that I said— I said that she belongs in there.'

She begins to climb the rest of the steps; behind her she can hear Richie say, 'Hey, I thought you said you got those cookies from—'

But then the bus begins limbering up and his voice is hissed away.

She steps onto the bus and, turning around, raises her voice against the sound of the engine. 'Remind him that he's to come collect me at seven-thirty. And you boys be sure to drop by again.'

'When? Mrs Aitch, hey, Mrs Aitch, when will we drop by again?' Michael yells and Richie pulls him by the tail of his T-shirt and he drops back from the step.

TNL_setting.indd 133 09/11/2018 15:38

As she makes her way down the bus she can see them through the windows. First they are both waving like crazy, then Michael alone is waving while Richie begins to retreat. Now Richie has turned his back and is running out to cross over the street. As she passes from one window to the next, there are glimpses of Michael, waving, then looking over his shoulder, then waving again. Finally, there is one last uncertain wave before Michael turns and runs after Richie.

She finds her place. Sitting on the edge of the seat, she watches Michael climb into the Buick and, as it begins to pull away, the two boys wriggling like polecats in the back as they talk to her husband over the seat.

She settles into her place, puts the bag down at her feet and watches the rear of the automobile disappear into the street while she waits for the bus to start moving.



TNL_setting.indd 134 09/11/2018 15:38