

HOME COMING

Screenplay by
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Adapted from the novel by
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Producer
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SHOOTING SCRIPT
6/15/95

"HOMECOMING"

FADE IN:

TITLE SEQUENCE:

A1 The Atlantic Ocean, under moonlight.

A2 LIZA TILLERMAN, 35, sad moon-face, long blonde hair, softly sings "THE WATER IS WIDE," staring at the breakers just beyond her kitchen window, seeing nothing.

A3 Liza smashes a piggy bank -- coins spill onto a kitchen table in her ramshackle cabin, its bathtub in the corner. She sweeps the coins into a mesh purse.

A4 DICEY TILLERMAN, 13, alert hazel eyes, darkly tanned, short brown hair, wakes with a start in a cramped bedroom where THREE other SIBLINGS sleep. She slips out of bed, drawn by sounds from the kitchen.

A5 Liza rummages through a closet until she finds a shoe box full of Christmas cards, all with the same return address, "CILLA LOGAN, 1724 OCEAN DRIVE, BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT." Liza looks up -- Dicey, sleep in her eyes, watches from the bedroom door.

A6 Dicey leans close to MAYBETH, 9, angelic face and curly blonde hair, gently shaking her -- the little girl wakes disoriented, watching her sister wake her two brothers.

A7 Dicey and Maybeth make peanut-butter sandwiches while watching Liza pull clothes from a laundry basket.

JAMES, 10, wiry build with intelligent eyes, precisely writes the Bridgeport address on four grocery bags as Liza hovers at his shoulder, reading it off an envelope. SAMMY, 6, stocky with blonde hair, sleeps with his head on the table.

A8 Under moonlight, Liza carries Sammy from the house, followed by James, Maybeth and Dicey with the grocery bags -- Dicey pauses to turn out the light and shut the door.

A9 Liza inserts the key into the ignition of her beat-up Chevy Sedan, Dicey in front, the others in back. Liza rests her forehead on the steering wheel -- none of the children dare speak.

A10 The Chevy motors an isolated stretch of road.

A11 Its headlights on, the Chevy is parked on the shoulder of a deserted two-laner. Sammy pees on the right front tire while Dicey studies the map under the glare of the interior light. James sleeps but Maybeth leans forward to wrap her arms around her mother.

END TITLE SEQUENCE

EXT. PEEWAUKET SHOPPING MALL/CHEVY - DAY

The Chevy enters a parking lot active on a muggy summer morning, Dicey drowsy with the map open on her lap, the others asleep in back. Liza parks across two spaces -- the back-seaters stir groggily. She grabs her purse, gets out, then puts her face back in the window.

LIZA

You be good, you hear me? You
little ones mind what Dicey
tells you. You hear?

TILLERMANS

(all except Dicey)
Yes, Momma.

LIZA

That's all right then.

Through the bug-splattered windshield they watch her go, her stride hindered by a broken sandal thong, elbows jutting through holes in the oversized sweater, her jeans faded and baggy. James leans into the front.

JAMES

Where are we? Why'd we stop?

DICEY

I dunno. You heard everything
she said, same as I did. You
tell me.

JAMES

All she said was 'we gotta stop here.' She didn't say why. She never says why.

Dicey looks at Maybeth hunched big-eyed in the corner.

DICEY

Why don't you tell them a story.

JAMES

What story?

DICEY

Cripes, James, you're the one with the famous brain.

The two sisters share a smile before Dicey props her feet on the dash and closes her eyes.

JAMES

Yeah, well I can't think of any stories right now.

MAYBETH

Tell about the dinosaur.

Her voice is small and shy.

SAMMY

Yeah, yeah -- the baby Brontosaurus that gets lost.

DICEY

That's a good one.

James sighs before addressing his eager audience.

JAMES

Okay. Once upon a time, like way before people were even around, like 200 million years ago, an old T-Rex lived all alone out in the marshland ...

The STORY FADES OUT as Dicey succumbs to sleep.

INT. CHEVY/PEEWAUKET MALL - DAY

The sun burns high in the sky -- Dicey sleeps. Maybeth softly sings a LULLABY to her cradled grass doll. James reads a ragged paperback, H.G. Wells' The Time Machine, while Sammy stares at passing SHOPPERS, awaiting his mother. Dicey stirs awake, her arms and legs sticking to the vinyl seat.

DICEY
What time's it?

JAMES
I dunno. You've been asleep a long time. I'm hungry.

DICEY
Where's Momma?

JAMES
I dunno. I'm hungry.

DICEY
You're always hungry.

SAMMY
Me, too -- and I'm gonna eat.

Sammy grabs a peanut-butter sandwich from the food bag.

JAMES
What do you want me to do? Go look for her?

DICEY
No. Sammy, give Maybeth a sandwich, too. Let her choose for herself.

Maybeth selects one, then James. Dicey stores the bag under the seat. The three younger ones eat in silence.

DICEY (CONT'D)
I'm going to see what time it is.

MAYBETH
(softly)
Don't you go away, too.

Dicey, momentarily caught off-guard by her sister's words, makes a best-attempt smile to reassure.

INT. THE MALL - DAY

Dicey walks the mall in a sea of STRANGERS, her eyes searching side to side.

INT. MALL FOUNTAIN - DAY

TIRED SHOPPERS, TEEN LOVERS and PLAYFUL CHILDREN lounge on stairs beside a colorful, cascading waterfall.

ANNOUNCER
(ON LOUDSPEAKER)
Attention, shoppers, would Mrs.
Liza Tillerman please meet her
daughter by the Majestic
Fountain ... Liza Tillerman,
please meet ...

Midst the crowded stairs, Dicey sits in distressed attention.

EXT. PEEWAUKET MALL/CHEVY - DAY

Dicey returns to find James at the wheel, Maybeth in back and Sammy somersaulting between the seats -- the others wait expectantly, even Sammy pausing his antics.

JAMES
Did you find her? Why's she
taking so long?

DICEY
(shaking her head)
We'll wait here 'til morning.

JAMES
What do you mean? Where is
she?

SAMMY
Where'll we sleep?

DICEY

Right here -- and no
complaints.

SAMMY

Then Momma'll come back and
we'll go on tomorrow?

Dicey battles a surge of angry tears. She nods. Maybeth
stares from the back, her eyes wide with dread.

INT. MALL FOOD COURT - NIGHT

Surrounded by FAMILIES and TEENS in adjacent booths, the
subdued Tillermans eat burgers, fries and shakes, doing
their best to act as if nothing were wrong.

INT. CHEVY/PEEWAUKET MALL - NIGHT

Dicey and James keep a night watch in the front seat while
Sammy and Maybeth sleep in the back; the parking lot is
nearly empty.

JAMES

My stomach feels weird. Why'd
she do this, what's wrong with
her?

He drops his chin in despair.

DICEY

James -- if she isn't back by
morning, I think we should go
on to Bridgeport.

JAMES

How'll we get there? You can't
drive, Momma took the keys.

DICEY

We could take a bus.

JAMES

I think we should go to the
police and ask for help.

DICEY

We can't. If we go to the police, they're just gonna split us up and put us in foster homes -- you remember that lady who came to our house, the social worker?
(he nods)
Okay then, you know it's true.

JAMES

Dicey? Do you think Momma meant to leave us here?

DICEY

I think she meant to take us to Bridgeport.

She looks out to the night.

DICEY (CONT'D)

Momma loves us. That's all I know.

INT. MALL PAY PHONES - NIGHT

The mall stores are closed, the corridor empty; Dicey cradles the receiver of a pay phone.

DICEY

(ON PHONE)

In Bridgeport, Cilla Logan on Ocean Drive.

A burly SECURITY GUARD with holstered .38 approaches the phones.

OPERATOR

(O.S.)

I'm sorry -- that number's unlisted.

DICEY

(ON PHONE)

It's an emergency.

OPERATOR

(O.S.)

I'm sorry, dear, but we're not allowed to give that information. Can I help you with another call?

The guard stops in front of Dicey.

SECURITY GUARD

We're closing up, kid.

Dicey reluctantly hangs up the phone. He braces his arm against the wall to block her exit.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

You know anything about that broken window over at Record City?

Intimidated, she shakes her head.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

You look familiar, what's your name?

She stares up at the unfriendly face.

DICEY

Kathy.

SECURITY GUARD

Where do you live, Kathy?

DICEY

(pointing)

Over there.

Frowning, he looks her up and down.

SECURITY GUARD

Let's take a little trip together. Sound good?

He grabs her shoulder but Dicey takes a step backward.

DICEY

Look it, mister, our phone just broke and I had to call my mom at work 'cause my sister is really sick and I have to get home right away.

SECURITY GUARD

(disbelieving)

Oh, yeah? Your phone's broke, huh?

(gripping her arm)

Well don't you worry, we'll ...

Thinking fast, Dicey jerks her knee toward his groin -- he flinches -- she bolts.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

Stop, you! Hey, stop right there!

He pursues, though losing ground to the fleet Dicey.

INT. CHEVY/PEEWAUKET MALL - NIGHT

In the vast lot only the Chevy remains. James stiffly grips the wheel while the younger ones sleep in back. The quiet is broken by SHARP RAPS at the passenger window. Startled, he reaches across to pop the lock -- Dicey, flushed, slips inside.

DICEY

(intense whisper)

C'mon, James, we gotta go. Sammy, Maybeth, wake up.

She reaches under the seat for their grocery bags.

JAMES

What happened?

DICEY

I'll tell you later, get everybody's stuff.

JAMES

Where are we going?

DICEY

Now, James!

Resigned, he helps the groggy Maybeth and Sammy collect their few belongings while Dicey sweeps the map, a jack-knife and other loose items from the dashboard into the food bag. Maybeth's grass doll sits abandoned in the back seat.

EXT. URBAN WOODS - DAY

As stars give way to dawn, Dicey stirs shivering in a small copse of trees at one end of the parking lot; the others lie huddled around her.

DICEY

James -- you awake?

Opening his eyes, he gazes at Dicey before speaking, his voice hollow and sad.

JAMES

It's still true.

He closes his eyes with a sigh. Dicey sits up, wrapping her arms around her knees, wondering what to do next. Sammy and Maybeth still sleep. Dicey pulls the money from her pocket and counts out nine one-dollar bills and change.

EXT. URBAN WOODS (LATER)

Maybeth builds a circle of stones around herself while Dicey and James, eating the last of their peanut-butter sandwiches, spread the map out on the ground. Sammy emerges from behind a bush hitching up his pants, then plops down next to Dicey.

DICEY

All right.

(pointing to map)

See, this is where we are, in Peewauket ...

She runs her finger from Peewauket to Bridgeport.

DICEY (CONT'D)
... and we're going to walk
along here, Highway One, to
Bridgeport.

SAMMY
What about Momma?

DICEY
I don't know where she is.

SAMMY
We can wait for Momma here.

DICEY
No, we can't. Momma will know
we went on to Aunt Cilla's and
that's where she'll come to
find us.

Sammy sets his jaw in stern defiance.

JAMES
Okay, but why aren't we taking
the bus?

DICEY
Because each ticket is eleven
dollars and twenty cents and
we've only got nine dollars all
together.

JAMES
Nine dollars! We shouldn't
have had supper last night.

DICEY
But we did. So it's no good
thinking, if we didn't. We
can't go back and we've got to
go somewhere. We're going to
have to walk. Maybeth?

Maybeth looks up from her circle of stones.

MAYBETH
That's fine, Dicey.

JAMES

How far is it?

DICEY

I don't know for sure. It'll be hard -- we have to carry as little as possible. Just one bag for all of us.

She begins to stuff their meager belongings into a single brown grocery bag.

JAMES

Can I bring my book?

DICEY

No. Everybody put on clean socks.

JAMES

Why? It's hotter with socks on.

DICEY

Because you'll get blisters.

SAMMY

(glaring)
I'm not going.

JAMES

(matter-of-factly)
What'll you do?

SAMMY

Wait here for Momma. Not here exactly, in the car.

Dicey crouches beside him.

DICEY

Sammy -- Momma's not coming back here. That's what I think. I think maybe she forgot.

SAMMY

Momma wouldn't forget me.

DICEY

No, she wouldn't. But she's forgotten where we are I think.

On the verge of tears, he adamantly shakes his head.

DICEY (CONT'D)

So if we go to Aunt Cilla's that's where she'll probably be. We have to go find her.

SAMMY

I don't want to.

DICEY

I don't want to, either. But we have to.

SAMMY

No, we don't.

Dicey stands in frustration, stamping her foot.

DICEY

Then I'll carry you.

SAMMY

(standing)
I'll kick you.

DICEY

Don't you understand?! She's not coming back, not here.

Maybeth steps forward.

MAYBETH

Sammy -- Momma said to do what Dicey tells us. You heard her.

He stares with furrowed brow at his sister, both sturdy little blonds with round bellies, Maybeth taller.

SAMMY

Dicey's not our Momma.

JAMES

Hey, look.

PARKING LOT - TILLERMANS' POV

The lot is empty except for a police car parked beside their Chevy. A POLICE OFFICER opens the passenger door and reaches into the glove compartment.

BACK TO:

TILLERMANS

Frightened. Dicey grabs Sammy's hand.

DICEY

Sammy, right now.

She snares the grocery bag, then leads a scramble up an embankment. At the top of the slope, they stare mesmerized at their 'captured' car until Dicey breaks the spell.

DICEY (CONT'D)

C'mon, walk.

They walk, away from the car and everything they know.

EXT. ROUTE ONE - DAY

An EIGHTEEN WHEELER throttles the four-lane commercial road -- gas stations, mini-malls, fast food -- to reveal the Tillermans walking the shoulder, each one lost in their own fears.

EXT. ROUTE ONE - DAY

They trudge at the edge of the highway, Dicey listening to Sammy and Maybeth's recitation.

SAMMY/MAYBETH

1724 Ocean Drive, Bridgeport,

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...

Sammy finds a quarter -- the others laugh at his victory jig.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

A water hose quenches their thirst. Last to drink, James turns the hose on a rambunctious Sammy. Dicey steals the hose to spray the fleeing James.

INT. SUPERMARKET - DAY

Dicey selects a loaf of bread from a bin of day-old bakery goods. She turns to find Sammy wolfing a doughnut from an open box. Exasperated, she grabs the box of doughnuts, leaving the bread behind.

EXT. ROUTE ONE/BUS STOP - DAY

Eating apples and doughnuts, they sit four across on the bench. Dicey studies the map spread on her lap.

EXT. ROUTE ONE - DAY

Singing "THE ANTS GO MARCHING," the Tillermans 'march' with exaggerated steps, Sammy with a stick on his shoulder.

EXT. ROUTE ONE - DAY

Silenced by the NOISY TRAFFIC, James and Maybeth pass a PLAYGROUND. Sammy lags behind on Dicey's hand, staring wistfully through a chain-link fence at a MOTHER playing with her CHILDREN. Dicey snaps at him so he resists a little more.

EXT. RAMSHACKLE HOUSE - DAY

In a wooded area with TRAFFIC NOISE in the distance, James creeps along the side of a house to a boarded window -- he peeks inside. Dicey follows with Sammy asleep on her back and Maybeth clutching her leg.

EXT. RAMSHACKLE HOUSE/BACK YARD - DAY

They wade around the corner through overgrown grass. Dicey drops to her knees -- James helps ease Sammy to the ground.

JAMES

Maybe we could live here.

Exhausted, Dicey collapses in the grass. James and Maybeth sprawl nearby.

JAMES (CONT'D)

It's a bed. Better than a bed.
A cloud.

The Tillermans drift toward sleep.

EXT. RAMSHACKLE HOUSE/BACK YARD - DAY

At sunset, James, Maybeth and Sammy gather fallen branches from the adjacent woods, then deliver to Dicey who leans over her 'starter' pile of twigs and leaves, blowing a few embers.

EXT. RAMSHACKLE HOUSE/BACK YARD - NIGHT

Each Tillerman cooks their hot dog on a stick around the campfire.

DICEY

Sammy, don't burn it.

SAMMY

I like it that way.

JAMES

What's this Aunt Cilla going to be like?

DICEY

I don't know but she lives in a big mansion right next to the ocean.

JAMES

How do you know?

DICEY

Momma said.

JAMES

(rolling his eyes)
But she never even went there -
- just that dumb Christmas card every year.

Shrugging off his comment, Dicey checks her hot dog.

DICEY

They're done.

They wrap their dogs in slices of bread and begin to eat.

JAMES

I wish we had ketchup and
mustard.

SAMMY

And watermelon for dessert.

JAMES

A chocolate sundae with whipped
cream and a cherry on top.

SAMMY

Yeah, me, too. I wish we had
that.

MAYBETH

I wish we had Momma.

A SILENCE, until Sammy adds another branch to the fire.

DICEY

No more wood. We're going to
sleep on the porch.

SAMMY

I'm going to sleep here where
it's warm.

He lays on his stomach facing the fire, light etching his
stubborn face.

DICEY

We've gotta sleep together.

SAMMY

I don't see why.

DICEY

'Cause we gotta stick together.

SAMMY

Momma didn't.

DICEY
Well, we have to.

SAMMY
Well, I don't care.

Maybeth curls up next to her frustrated sister. She begins to sing "THE CHERRY THAT HAS NO STONE" in a clear voice with beautiful pitch -- James adds his harmony. Sammy sleeps, Dicey stares into the fire.

EXT. 1724 OCEAN DRIVE/BRIDGEPORT - DAY

On a crisp morning, the Tillermans reach a bright red mailbox.

DICEY
(murmuring)
1724 Ocean drive.

They gaze in awe at the beautiful SEA-CAPTAIN'S HOUSE overlooking Long Island Sound. TWO WOMEN appear on a balcony: AUNT CILLA and their Momma, waving happily.

TILLERMANS
Momma!

Liza hurries down as the children sprint the expanse of manicured lawn. Liza bursts out the door with outstretched arms -- first James, then Sammy and Maybeth fall into their mother's embrace. Dicey, running last, is one step away
...

EXT. RAMSHACKLE HOUSE/PORCH - DAWN

Dicey jolts awake on the rotten planks, rolling over to face Maybeth and Sammy cuddled against the chill. James stirs awake.

JAMES
(moaning)
It's still true.

EXT. ROUTE ONE - DAY

The Tillermans walk the road busy with morning COMMUTERS.

EXT. FAST FOOD PICNIC AREA - DAY

All except Sammy sit at an outdoor table sipping from a single coke; Dicey's busy counting her money as Sammy returns.

DICEY

Okay, James -- you next.

He heads for the bathroom.

EXT. ROUTE ONE/STONINGTON - DAY

Reconnoitering beneath a sign 'ENTERING STONINGTON,' Dicey spreads the map on the ground. James squats beside her.

JAMES

Where are we?

Dicey points: they've walked one-quarter inch from Peewauket with twelve map-inches yet to Bridgeport.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Only there?! This is impossible, Dicey -- we'll never get to Bridgeport.

SAMMY

But we have to -- that's where Momma's gonna be.

JAMES

What if she's not there?

SAMMY

She will be, don't say that. She knows we're going there.

JAMES

That's how much you know.

Sammy hurtles into James with kicks and flailing arms -- Dicey pulls him off.

DICEY

Cut that out, Sammy, you hear me? Do that again and I'll whip you for sure.

She fixes a fierce gaze on the sullen James.

DICEY (CONT'D)

We've just got to keep moving -
- I don't care how long it
takes, we'll get there.

She grabs Sammy's hand and none too gently tugs him forward, the clothes bag in her other hand. James hesitates until Maybeth takes his hand.

EXT. HOUSING DEVELOPMENT - DAY

At dawn, Dicey hustles her brood out the back of an unfinished house as CARPENTERS arrive for work.

INT. GAS STATION BATHROOM - DAY

In a grimy, graffitied bathroom, Maybeth rinses her face at the sink while Dicey sits on the toilet counting their money.

INT. SUPERMARKET CHECK-OUT STAND - DAY

Waiting in the check-out line with four bananas and a small jar of peanut butter, the Tillermans stare enviously as a housewife unloads her brimming grocery cart.

EXT. SUPERMARKET - DAY

Seated on a bench, the Tillermans glob peanut butter on their bananas, devouring every last bit. Finally they scrape the glass jar with their fingers.

EXT. CAR WASH - NIGHT

Hidden by vertical roller brushes inside the concrete tunnel, Dicey ponders the rain. She's startled when TWO HOMELESS MEN pass behind her siblings spooned asleep on a piece of cardboard. Frightened, she keeps a vigilant eye as they spread their cardboard at the far end of the car wash.

EXT. HIGHWAY OVERPASS - DAY

At dawn, the Tillermans wake beneath a concrete overpass; above, the ROAR of SPEEDING CARS.

INT. RURAL GENERAL STORE - DAY

Dacey approaches the counter with four apples and four potatoes. She points to fishing gear on the wall behind the young RED-HAIRED CLERK.

DACEY
How much are hooks?

CLERK
Ten cents each.

DACEY
One, please. And some fishing
line.

He puts the hook and a spool on the counter. Dacey checks the price of the line -- too expensive. Disappointed, she returns it with a shake of her head. He rings up the other items -- Dacey pays.

CLERK
You going to the park?

DACEY
Yeah. My brothers and sister
and me, we're going to cook
out. And fish.

CLERK
Sounds like fun. Look ...

He drops the spool in her bag.

CLERK (CONT'D)
... you'll need this if you
want to fish. No extra charge.

Surprised by his generosity, she grabs her bag and makes for the door but turns back just before exiting.

DACEY
Thanks an awful lot.

EXT. ROCKLAND STATE PARK - DAY

Munching their apples and refreshed by a salty wind, the Tillermans sing an exuberant "PRETTY PEGGY-O," though

softly so as to complement the quiet forest that surrounds. They reach the top of a bluff: the ocean and beach beckon. Dicey and James share a look.

JAMES

Like home.

She nods agreement.

DICEY

Last one down has to wash all
the underwear!

They race down the sandy path, tumbling and laughing.

EXT. ROCKLAND BEACH - DAY

Knee deep in the breakers, Dicey scrubs underwear while James and Sammy fish off some big rocks, Sammy manning the single line. Maybeth lays out the washed underwear in the sand. BEACHGOERS frolic at the MAIN BEACH about one-half mile away.

JAMES

Why are you putting them there?
They'll get sandy.

Hesitating, Maybeth looks to Dicey.

DICEY

That'll blow away once they're
dry.

JAMES

I don't want sand in my
underpants.

Sammy looks up from his line.

SAMMY

Shhh! They don't like noise.

He trolls his line slowly back and forth -- a strike!

SAMMY (CONT'D)

James!

A surprised James helps tug the slippery line.

JAMES

Dicey!

She scrambles onto the rock, joining the excited fray. It's all arms and legs as they reel in a five-pound sea bass -- the fish slips off the hook and only Sammy's tackle keeps it from flopping back to the sea. He proudly hugs the slimy fish.

SAMMY

I got one!

EXT. ROCKLAND CAMPGROUND - NIGHT

Dicey uses a stick to turn the potatoes in the hot coals while the others stare at the fish cooking on a skewer over the fire; the campground is mostly empty.

JAMES

You know what? We're the kind that people go off from. First our father and now Momma. What do you think, Dicey -- is there something wrong with us?

DICEY

I don't know and I don't care.

She sticks her knife into the potatoes to check if they're done.

DICEY (CONT'D)

We don't need anybody else, we're the Tillermans.

SAMMY

And I am, too.

DICEY

Yes, you are.

JAMES

Dicey, you'd never go off and leave us.

Dicey goes on alert when a Camaro, playing GRUNGE ROCK, cruises into the campground.

JAMES (CONT'D)
You wouldn't, would you?

The Camaro slows to a stop, its headlights angled on the frightened children.

DICEY
James -- c'mon!

She slips her brood into the shadows just before the car swings into their campsite, its headlights on the abandoned fish. FIVE COLLEGE ROWDIES, 20s, emerge with a swagger and a case of beer.

DRIVER
(calling)
Yoo-hoo -- anybody home?

From a distance, the Tillermans grimly watch the laughing strangers descend on their supper.

EXT. RAILROAD TRACK - DAY

Dicey leads the Tillermans along a trestle without end. James passes Maybeth and Sammy to speak privately with Dicey.

JAMES
How much money do we have?

DICEY
Not much.

He awaits an exact reckoning.

DICEY (CONT'D)
Twenty-six cents. And I left
all our stuff at the park.

He absorbs the news with a sigh.

JAMES
What are we going to eat?

DICEY
I don't know, we'll find
something.

JAMES

Dacey, we can't do this anymore. It's not fair to the little kids.

DICEY

It'll get better.

JAMES

No, it won't. We have to get help.

DICEY

It's hard to know who to trust and I can't take any chances. Do you understand?

JAMES

We're just kids. We should've asked for help from the very beginning.

She stops in her tracks.

DICEY

That's really stupid, James -- you know we can't.

JAMES

No, I don't know -- anything would be better than this. Even a foster home.

She shoots him a long stare as the little ones now watch frightened.

DICEY

We'll make it. I'll think of something.

She continues on.

JAMES

(calling after)
My stomach hurts.

SAMMY
(erupting)
Mine, too. I'll die if I don't
eat.

Dicey turns back with a fierce look.

DICEY
You won't die. Not in one day.
Starvation takes days and days.
C'mon.

The Tillermans trudge on, Dicey determined, Maybeth's eyes glistening with tears, James and Sammy lagging behind.

EXT. ROUTE ONE/GAS STATION - DAY

Sammy, Maybeth and James, seated with blank expressions on a curb, watch Dicey squeegee the plate-glass windows of a gas station across the street.

INT. GAS STATION - DAY

Dicey returns pail and squeegee to the closet, then selects a quart of milk from the refrigerated shelves.

ATTENDANT
Nice job, kid. Come back
anytime.

She thanks him with a nod, then hurries to the door.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

Behind the station out of sight, Dicey sadly watches her bedraggled family pass the milk from one to another, sucking desperate guzzles until not a drop is left.

EXT. CONNECTICUT RIVER BRIDGE - DAY

Near twilight, Dicey reads the 'NO PEDESTRIANS NO BICYCLES' signboard posted in front of the eight-lane interstate bridge. She slides down the steep embankment where her family waits. Despairing, she studies their apprehensive faces.

DICEY
We can't walk the bridge.

JAMES

Why can't ...

DICEY

It's against the law, police
could pick us up.

JAMES

We could go upriver to the next
bridge.

DICEY

Wrong direction and it would
take days, maybe a week.

JAMES

Could we swim it?

For his benefit, Dacey looks pointedly at the two little ones then walks past him to gaze over the broad river: a sailboat glides past. She crouches, burying her face in her knees. Her siblings watch, distressed by her distress. Maybeth rests a hand on her shoulder.

MAYBETH

What's wrong, Dacey?

Wiping a tear, Dacey almost laughs.

DICEY

What's right?

A scared Sammy sits beside her. She offers a weak smile, then gazes out to the river. James walks a little further down the slope, his back to his siblings.

JAMES

We could take a boat.

DICEY

We never stole things. We
don't have to steal.

JAMES

Not steal it, just borrow it.

Sammy and Maybeth await her decision.

EXT. CONNECTICUT RIVER/EAST BANK - NIGHT

Dicey and James carry a rowboat across the lawn of an expensive home; Maybeth and Sammy each drag an oar. They set their tiny craft in the water -- a DOG BARKS.

DICEY
(whispering)
Hurry, hurry!

Sammy and Maybeth scramble into the bow as Dicey ships the oars. James lurches into the stern as house floodlights pop on to illumine Dicey frantically rowing into the current.

EXT. WEST BANK MARINA - NIGHT

Dicey rows silently into a marina crowded with big boats, some with PEOPLE still aboard. She steers alongside a darkened yacht. James ties up to its stern, then holds their craft steady until all climb onto the dock. They walk the wharf past the other boats, trying to act as if they belonged.

EXT. OLD SAYBROOK - NIGHT

They walk through the darkened town, Sammy stumbling half-asleep. Dicey crouches to take him on her back. They continue toward an old white church illumined by spotlights and beyond, up on a hill, a graveyard.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - NIGHT

Dicey and James sit leaning against adjacent tombstones, gazing at the town and river below; Maybeth and Sammy sleep nearby on a piece of cardboard.

JAMES
It's too ... quiet.

Yawning, Dicey tries to get comfortable.

DICEY
I like quiet.

He looks around at the granite tombstones.

JAMES

Dicey? (BEAT) Do you think
Momma's dead?

DICEY

I don't know. How could I know
that?

JAMES

(hopefully)
Maybe she got kidnapped?

DICEY

That happens to rich people.

JAMES

The kids at school said things
about Momma, bad things, about
not being married.

DICEY

Did they say things to Sammy?

JAMES

Yeah, I think he really got it
at school, especially after
Maybeth -- you know, she hardly
talks so kids thought something
was wrong with her.

DICEY

There's nothing wrong with her.

James lets his hand drift over the grave marker.

JAMES

Some kids said Momma was crazy.

DICEY

Not to me they didn't.

JAMES

That's cause you can fight.
Craziness can run in families,
you know -- it's hereditary.

Sighing, Dicey lies back on the grass, ready for sleep.
James contemplates the glowing lights from the homes below.

JAMES (CONT'D)

No matter what, we're all gonna
die. So it doesn't matter what
we do, does it?

DICEY

James -- we drifted way
downriver and I'm trying to
figure out where we might be.
And I'm worried about what
we're going to eat tomorrow and
how to get money ... so please
just go to sleep, okay?

JAMES

I can't, I'm too hungry.

Dicey turns to him, silently lifting her arm. He snuggles
in beside her, facing away.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Some guy named Einstein figured
out that light travels 186,000
miles in one second.

(to himself, softly)

I wish I could go that fast.
We'd be there by now. Be
somewhere.

EXT. NEW HAVEN/DOWNTOWN - DAY

Beneath a steady rain, the children walk past window-grated
stores -- Sammy clutches Dicey's hand, Maybeth shadows
close, James limps behind, a hole worn in his sneaker.
Dicey defensively scans the grim faces of HOMELESS PEOPLE
watching from their cardboard hovels.

EXT. YALE UNIVERSITY COMMONS - NIGHT

Drenched, her head bowed to the rain, Dicey hunches on a
bench at the center of the Commons; the city surrounds on
all sides. An ache swells in her throat, then tears begin
to fall. A SILHOUETTED FIGURE approaches -- Dicey buries
her chin into folded arms, feigning sleep. The stranger
sits at the other end of the bench. Panicked, she darts a

glance into the concerned eyes of WINDY, 20, hair plastered over his forehead and wearing a yellow slicker.

WINDY
You looked like you were
crying. Can I help?

Dicey bites her lip and shakes her head.

WINDY (CONT'D)
You lost?
(she shakes her head)
Can you walk home from here?
(she shakes her head)
Cat got your tongue?

DICEY
Nope.

WINDY
Can I tell you what I think?
(she waits)
Okay -- I think you don't have
a place to sleep, you're
probably hungry and frightened
and you don't want to tell me
anything. So far, am I right?

She doesn't deny it.

WINDY (CONT'D)
I've been in your kind of jam
myself, more than once. Look,
I have an idea for you.

DICEY
Yeah?

WINDY
Yeah. Don't say no right away.
Okay? Okay. Why don't you
come with me and get some food.

DICEY
I don't have any money.

WINDY

I do. It's a great spot, right
close by.

He wriggles his big, bushy brows -- Dicey almost smiles.

WINDY (CONT'D)

Have you made up your mind to
trust me?

DICEY

I'm afraid so.
(he laughs)
But I'm not alone. Is that
okay?

WINDY

(puzzled)
Yeah, whatever.

DICEY

Wait here. Please.

He dutifully remains on the bench while Dicey disappears inside a nearby CLUSTER OF BUSHES where her family sleeps huddled together. Windy watches as Dicey emerges holding Sammy's hand, an arm around Maybeth, James limping behind, their blank faces muddied, hair matted, clothes dirty. The smile drains from Windy's eyes.

EXT. LANGTON'S DINER - NIGHT

Rain blankets the cozy diner. In a booth by the window, the famished Tillermans feast on burgers, fries and shakes while Windy keeps them smiling with stories, gesturing grandly with his arms. The children celebrate when the WAITRESS arrives with apple pie a la mode.

INT. COLLEGE DORM HALLWAY - NIGHT

Windy leads the Tillermans past open doorways -- COLLEGE KIDS poke their heads into the hall, watching the unlikely parade slip into Windy's room.

INT. COLLEGE DORM SUITE - NIGHT

In one bedroom of a disheveled suite, Dicey tucks the two little ones snuggled in bed, then steps over James sleeping

on a piece of foam on the floor. She softly closes the door, returning to where Windy is 'making up' the couch.

WINDY

You know, Bridgeport's like no more than a half-hour down the thruway. I've got a ten o'clock class but we could leave right after -- do you mind waiting?

DICEY

Do you know how long it would take us to walk it? Three days. Maybe four. I'd be a jerk to say I minded.

WINDY

And you're not a jerk, right?

DICEY

Nope. Other things. Bossy. And I lie and I fight but I'm not a jerk.

WINDY

Whew, that's a relief.

She settles into the couch bed -- he sits in a worn armchair, quietly picking on a guitar.

WINDY (CONT'D)

Dicey?

DICEY

(sleepily)

Yeah?

WINDY

What do you think was going on with your mom? I mean, why'd she take off with you guys in the middle of the night?

DICEY

I don't know. Things were okay
for a while but then she lost
her job at the supermarket.
And things.

He listens patiently.

DICEY (CONT'D)

Maybeth was having trouble at
school but Momma wouldn't talk
to her teacher -- she just tore
up all the notes. Sometimes
she'd just sit with her hands
over her face. She wouldn't
talk anymore, not even to yell
at us, or sing, or make up
games the way she used to.

He nods, swallowing a question.

DICEY (CONT'D)

Now we just hope she makes it
to Bridgeport.

WINDY

Me, too.

She's barely able to keep her eyes open.

WINDY (CONT'D)

(rising)
You okay here?

She sighs. He turns off the lights, bidding "GOOD NIGHT" -
- she's asleep before he even closes the door.

INT. DORM BATHROOM - DAY

Dicey luxuriates in the shower's warm spray.

INT. DORM HALLWAY - DAY

Toweling her hair, Dicey passes a FEW COLLEGE BOYS in the
hall -- she's a little embarrassed but they don't seem to
take notice.

INT. DORM SUITE - DAY

Dacey enters cheerfully to find James, Maybeth and Sammy all showered and dressed but standing with bowed heads. Windy searches his bureau.

DACEY
What's wrong?

WINDY
I thought I left a twenty on
the dresser but now I can't
find it. Gas money, too.

Dacey turns to Sammy -- he shakes his head decisively. Her gaze fixes on James, his hands clenched in his pockets.

DACEY
James.

He fires an angry glance.

JAMES
Whyn'cha ask Sammy?

DACEY
Sammy said he didn't.

JAMES
Then neither did I.

Dacey looks shamefully at Windy who's speechless for the first time.

DACEY
(quietly)
Give it to me, James.

He pulls a hand out of his pocket: a crumpled bill falls to the floor.

JAMES
Get it yourself.

DICEY

(exploding)

I told you we don't steal and you just go ahead and do it. Then you lie to me. I could kill you, James, you hear me? You're so smart but you can't even ...

(sputtering)

... look what you've done!

He stands with bowed head.

DICEY (CONT'D)

You ruined everything.

Eyes on the floor, James jerks his head towards Windy.

JAMES

He doesn't need the money like we do, he's got sweaters and guitars.

Dicey goes right up in his face -- he meets her stare.

DICEY

So what! And who are you to say, anyhow? All I asked you was to do what I say, only that, and now ...

JAMES

I thought you said it was like a war, us against them until we get to Bridgeport -- isn't that what your stupid plan was all about?

Rather than strike him, Dicey turns and smacks the window sill.

DICEY

You're a thief. You steal.

JAMES

Big deal. It doesn't matter.

DICEY

Okay. Okay, if that's the way
you want it but until we get to
Aunt Cilla's you will do
exactly what I say to do -- or
I'll leave you behind.

He looks away, this threat the worst.

DICEY (CONT'D)

Do you understand?
(he nods)
Then we better get out of here.
Apologize, James.

He drops his chin, tears brimming his eyes.

JAMES

I'm sorry.

DICEY

Okay.
(to siblings)
C'mon, let's go.

She pulls Sammy toward the door, Maybeth takes James by the
hand.

WINDY

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

He crouches to pick up the crumpled bill.

WINDY (CONT'D)

(smoothing bill)
Well looky-loo -- and right
here on my floorboards the
whole time.

He holds it up to the window.

WINDY (CONT'D)

Yeah, this is definitely mine,
there's old Andy Jackson right
on the front. So -- Bridgeport
or bust?

He puts an arm around James, gives him a friendly squeeze, then guides him out the door.

WINDY (CONT'D)
Aunt Cilla, here we come.

The others follow, Dicey last with a sigh of relief.

INT. VW BUG/I-95 RAMP - DAY

Windy leads the Tillermans in a rousing version of "TURN TURN, TURN," as his old RED BUG sputters up the ramp; James rides 'shotgun' beside Windy, the others are packed in back. Dicey's face reflects both exhilaration and dread.

INT. VW BUG/OCEAN DRIVE - DAY

The red Bug sputters past an endless row of tightly-packed, box houses on a treeless street far from the ocean; all stare transfixed out the starboard windows.

JAMES
(reading curb
numbers)
1688 ... 1692 ... 1694 ...

SAMMY
Is Momma gonna be there?

DICEY
Let's hope, Sammy. Let's hope
really hard.

He squints his eyes and purses his lips.

SAMMY
I hope I hope I hope ...

Maybeth takes Dicey's hand.

JAMES
1718 ... 1720 ...

He stares silently.

DICEY
(whispers)
1724.

The Bug pulls to the curb: four disappointed faces absorb the drab, little house.

EXT. AUNT CILLA'S HOUSE - DAY

With a collective deep breath, the Tillermans plus Windy mount the porch steps. Dicey knocks apprehensively. She knocks again, louder: nothing. Sammy steps forward to bang the door with all his strength -- BAP BAP BAP. Windy puts his hands on the little boy's shoulders, soothing him.

EXT. OCEAN DRIVE - DAY

At the curb, the Tillermans bid farewell to Windy at the wheel of the Bug.

WINDY

You got my numbers, right?

(Dicey nods)

Zip code, birthday, football jersey and you're gonna call me if Aunt Cilla doesn't show, right?

(she nods)

Okay. And no matter what, you guys got to promise me -- you're gonna take your vitamins?

(she smiles)

Okay, cool. I'm outta here, organic chem exam in two hours.

At the last moment James sticks out his hand -- they shake.

WINDY (CONT'D)

Good man, James.

DICEY

Thank you, Windy. Thanks for everything.

He crinkles his brows, then sputters away with a FANFARE OF BEEPS -- the children wave, bereft at the curb.

EXT. AUNT CILLA'S HOUSE - DAY

In late afternoon, the Tillermans stir on the front steps when a CITY BUS stops across the street. It departs to reveal BLUE COLLAR WORKERS and EUNICE LOGAN, 40, a round woman with sausage curls in a black cotton dress, high heels and glasses. She crosses the street before stopping at the sight of children on her steps. She walks past her front walk, then turns and goes past it again, as if wanting to flee, before finally venturing toward the children with cautious steps, clutching her purse.

EUNICE

What do you want? What are you doing here?

DICEY

(rising)

We're the Tillermans.

Eunice stares blankly.

DICEY (CONT'D)

We're hoping you're our aunt, our great-aunt, Mrs. Cilla Logan.

A helpless smile flutters Eunice's lips.

EUNICE

That is mother, not me. I'm her daughter. That is, I was her daughter. Mother passed on this last March.

Sighing, she searches her purse for keys.

EUNICE (CONT'D)

But do come in. There's no need to loiter on the front stoop.

INT. FRONT HALL - DAY

Eunice patters inside followed by the somber Tillermans. She double-bolts the door.

EUNICE

This way.

They follow her down the dark hall. She pauses to point out a rocker in the shade-drawn LIVING ROOM.

EUNICE (CONT'D)

I found Mother sitting right there, a Wednesday. Her heart was weak, but she never, never complained.

She dabs her moistening eyes, then polishes her glasses.

DICEY

We're sorry.

EUNICE

(nodding)

It was a great shock -- in fact, I haven't been quite the same since Mother went away. People have said that to me.

She continues toward the kitchen. The children exchange anxious looks.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The Tillermans, sitting snugly at a Formica table in the squeaky clean kitchen, watch Eunice open windows overlooking a tiny back yard, then set a kettle on the burner.

EUNICE

So please tell me again precisely who you are.

DICEY

The Tillermans. I'm Dicey.
(pointing)
This is James, Maybeth and ...

SAMMY

Sammy.

EUNICE

Well let's see -- my mother's maiden name was Hackett ...

DICEY

Our mother is your mother's
niece. She sent us a Christmas
card every year. That's how we
knew about Aunt Cilla and her
address. But I don't even know
your name.

EUNICE

Eunice. Eunice Logan. Does
that make us second cousins?

DICEY

I don't know.

EUNICE

So but, where are your parents?
How long are you visiting in
Bridgeport?

Dicey cups her hand over Sammy's.

DICEY

Sammy. Momma's not here.

He nods with welling tears, then lays his forehead on her
hand. Eunice frets awkwardly.

EUNICE

You don't know where your
mother is?

(Dicey shakes her
head)

And your father?

(Dicey, again)

You're all alone?

They lower their heads in chagrin.

EUNICE (CONT'D)

Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear.
You poor, poor sweet things.

The TEAPOT WHISTLES -- she bustles around the stove.

EUNICE (CONT'D)

I just don't know what should
be done. You're absolutely
alone?

They nod with tightly clamped mouths. Eunice twice dips
her tea bag with frowning concentration, then sips the pale
hot water.

EUNICE (CONT'D)

I have to ask advice. Will you
excuse me to make a phone call?

Not waiting for a reply, she hurries through the swivel
door.

JAMES

What should we do?

DICEY

(shrugging)

Tell the truth and see what
happens.

MAYBETH

Is Momma gone for always?

DICEY

I don't know. She might as
well be.

Sammy lifts his teary eyes from Dicey's hand.

SAMMY

Don't you say that! Don't you
ever!

She gives him the end of her t-shirt to wipe his tears.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

In a room cluttered with china figurines and religious
icons, the Tillermans sit stiffly on a couch before three
adults: Eunice, who primly serves tea from her silver
service; FATHER JOSEPH, 60, a Catholic priest; SERGEANT
GORDO, 40s, a plainclothes detective. Gordo pulls an
envelope from the inside pocket of his sports jacket.

GORDO

Lest I forget, I went ahead and called up to Peewauket and the police there did impound a Chevy sedan registered to a Liza Tillerman. I explained your situation and they were good enough to wire me 150 dollars against the future sale of the vehicle at police auction.

He proffers the envelope -- Dicey reaches for it but Father Joseph snags it and gives it to Eunice.

FATHER JOSEPH

Eunice, why don't you hold onto this for the time being. Okay with you, Dicey?

She nods reluctantly, keeping an eye on the envelope in Eunice's hand.

GORDO

Okay, let's get back to our description -- do you remember what your mother was wearing?

DICEY

Blue jeans. A sweater -- a big, red sweater, with holes in the elbows. Sandals. A purse.

GORDO

Any jewelry -- rings, a watch?
(Dicey shakes her head)
No wedding ring?

DICEY

No.

Eunice nods disapprovingly toward Father Joseph.

EUNICE

Had you the same father? Would you know that?

SAMMY
(rising)
We're not bastards!

DICEY
Sammy!

She corrals Sammy into her lap as Eunice turns aghast to Father Joseph -- he gives her a calming look.

FATHER JOSEPH
That's all right, Eunice --
they would know and we
wouldn't.

GORDO
(covering a smile)
Okay. Dicey, can you think of
any other place your mother
might have gone -- friend,
relative?

Dicey shakes her head.

EUNICE
I should tell you my mother had
one sister, Abigail. She would
be the children's grandmother.

She picks a framed photo off a side table and gives it to Gordo. He glances at it, then passes it on to Dicey -- the others squeeze against her to get a look at the old black and white: a smiling MOTHER and FATHER stand behind a pretty TEENAGER and a scowling LITTLE GIRL with wild hair.

JAMES
Which one is our grandmother?

EUNICE
The little girl with the wild
hair. I wrote to her of
mother's passing but received
no reply.

FATHER JOSEPH

We called our church down there
and I asked the pastor to make
a visitation. She wouldn't let
him into the house and then
proceeded to rant and rave.
Apparently she has something of
a reputation.

Dacey and James share a quick glance.

EUNICE

Abigail was much younger than
mother and they never got
along. We later heard she
married a dirt farmer by the
name of Tillerman but that's
about all.

GORDO

Okay, we'll check into it --
what was that location?

FATHER JOSEPH

In Maryland, a town called
Crisfield.

Gordo notes it on his pad, then turns to Dacey.

GORDO

So do you think it's possible
your mother may have gone
there?

DICEY

I don't think so. She never
talked about her.

GORDO

(pocketing pad)

Okay fine. We'll do the best
we can, kids -- I'll let you
know as soon as we get
anything.

EUNICE

More tea, Sergeant?

GORDO

Not for me, thanks -- I got to get along.

(to Dicey)

Hang in there, kiddo.

(standing)

In the meantime can I assume the Tillermans are staying here?

EUNICE

Oh, dear.

She turns to Father Joseph.

FATHER JOSEPH

Just call me if you get any information. We're checking into some possible arrangements.

EUNICE

This whole situation has been so stressful, I'm just not sure yet, I hope you can understand.

GORDO

Tell me about it, I got four of my own.

Eunice and Father Joseph escort Gordo into the hall as the children stare gloomily.

INT. AUNT CILLA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

James reads Cilla's old Bible, Sammy jumps up and down on the double bed and Dicey fixes two pallets of blankets on the floor. A timid KNOCK -- Dicey motions insistently for Sammy to get down, then opens the door: a distressed Eunice, in robe and slippers, peers inside.

EUNICE

What is that awful noise?

Sammy smiles from under the covers.

EUNICE (CONT'D)
(to James)
Oh, dear, please be careful
with mother's Bible, it's an
heirloom.

Composing herself, she proudly guides Maybeth into the room, her hair permanented into ringlet curls just like her own -- the Tillermans stare shocked at their almost unrecognizable sister.

EUNICE (CONT'D)
Isn't she a little angel?

Dacey puts an arm around the embarrassed little girl.

EUNICE (CONT'D)
Dacey, would you please come
downstairs for a little chat?

Dacey follows Eunice into the hall, Eunice pulling the door closed.

EUNICE (CONT'D)
(whispering)
When I was fixing Maybeth's
hair, well, she barely uttered
a peep -- is something wrong
with her?

Dacey shakes her head.

EUNICE (CONT'D)
It's all right, dear, it can't
be easy for you, can it? You
know, mother and I would always
share a cup of Chamomile before
bed and I hoped you and I might
do the same.

Nodding acceptance, Dacey meekly follows Eunice down the hall.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Dacey watches Eunice dipping a tea bag into two china cups.

EUNICE

There are a few things I feel obligated to tell you.

She serves the tea and takes a seat opposite Dicey.

EUNICE (CONT'D)

Firstly, I go to Mass every morning at six-thirty and I hoped all of you might join me tomorrow.

DICEY

Okay.

EUNICE

Good.

(sipping tea)

Secondly, I'm planning to take the day off, my first in seven years.

She seems to wait for Dicey's response.

DICEY

You don't need to, we'll be okay.

EUNICE

Yes, well you see, after Mass we'll be going to the rectory.

DICEY

What for?

EUNICE

Well, dear Father Joseph has arranged for several parish families to come in and meet your brothers.

DICEY

Why?

EUNICE

Because I am simply not equipped to harbor four active children under this tiny roof but, God willing, we girls will manage somehow.

DICEY

But, Cousin Eunice -- I promised we'd stay together.

EUNICE

You know, Father Joseph said I was a saint to take you girls in, that anybody else would turn you over to Social Services, but I said I can't do that, they're my own flesh and blood.

DICEY

But you don't understand ...

EUNICE

Oh, but I do. Poor dear girl, I know it's not easy being all alone in this world but you see, now we can take care of each other. We are family after all.

She pats her hand -- Dacey wants to fight but doesn't know how.

EUNICE (CONT'D)

I feel so relieved now that we've talked, don't you?

Dacey stares back in defeat.

INT. AUNT CILLA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

While others sleep, Dacey stands at the window, gazing out once again into the unknown. She looks at the old photograph in her hands. In silent prayer, she traces the face of the little girl with wild hair: her grandmother.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALL - NIGHT

Silhouetted by a night-light, Dicey steals from her bedroom and creeps along the banister. At the end of the hall, she nudges open the door.

INT. EUNICE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dicey slips inside: Eunice sleeps in a laced canopy bed; votive candles burn at the Virgin altar, lighting an eerie melange of dolls, china figurines and plaster saints placed around the room. She tip-toes to the bureau, searching until she finds the envelope in a top drawer. She opens it: one-hundred fifty dollars. She pockets the envelope, then sets a note on top of the bureau. Eunice stirs -- Dicey hovers.

INT. STAIRWELL - NIGHT

The Tillermans tip-toe down the dark stairs, James at point and Dicey in the rear with their brown bag suitcase. He unlocks the front door and they make their escape, Dicey softly closing the door behind.

+(OMITTED)

+(OMITTED)

INT. GREYHOUND BUS - NIGHT

Only a FEW PASSENGERS ride the late-night bus, the Tillermans alone toward the back: the boys sleep side by side; the girls sit behind, Dicey studying her new map while Maybeth stares at the passing lights. Maybeth turns to her sister.

MAYBETH

Dicey. Are we going to see the
place Momma lived in when she
was a little girl?

(Dicey nods)

And see our grandmother?

DICEY

What's the matter? You scared?

(she nods)

So am I.

Maybeth nestles against her sister and begins to softly sing "THE WATER IS WIDE."

EXT. GREYHOUND STATION/ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND - DAY

The bus motors down a busy Main Street and stops in front of the bus station. The Tillermans disembark, Dicey trying to get her bearings with a look in each direction: in the distance, the Chesapeake Bay sparkles beneath a pure blue sky.

EXT. ANNAPOLIS HARBOR - DAY

Waiting on a bench, James, Sammy and Maybeth watch Dicey conversing with TWO TEENAGE BOYS, both 16, tanned and wearing swim trunks, aboard a twenty-five foot sailboat tied to the wharf -- she's pointing toward the open ocean. The boys seem intrigued.

EXT. CHESAPEAKE BAY - DAY

The sailboat skims across the bay waters, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in the background: Sammy's stretched out on the prow; James and Maybeth perch in front of the main sail; Dicey sits by the boys, both drinking cans of beer, at the tiller. The young captain and Dicey share a smile -- there's a hint of an innocent attraction. He offers her a chance at the tiller. They change seats and a thrilled Dicey navigates toward a distant shore. He points toward the mainsail -- Dicey adjusts the tiller until the sail billows to a full stretch.

EXT. EASTERN SHORE/ST. MICHAEL'S HARBOR - DAY

The boys hold the boat steady as the Tillermans clamber onto a dock. Dicey and the Captain share a handshake before she turns away with a shy smile, hustling her family along the wharf.

EXT. ROADSIDE STAND - DAY

Dicey pays a BOY, 13, for a cantaloupe, then cuts it into four pieces. Chomping huge bites, juice running down their chins, they study a 'HAWKINS CIRCUS' poster pasted on the side of the stand. The cantaloupe boy points out a shortcut across a flat, rural landscape, mostly big farms and tall pines.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Dacey leads her family single-file across a field, passing FARM WORKERS harvesting under a hot morning sun. She takes note of their work but keeps a pace that would discourage any questions.

EXT. CHOPTANK RIVER - DAY

The Tillermans pass SEVERAL BLACK FISHERMEN as they cross an old iron trestle bridge, the boys tossing stones into the big and wide Choptank.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The Tillermans trudge a narrow road bordered by fields of ripening tomatoes. Dacey pauses before a sign 'PICKERS WANTED' posted beside a long driveway. She looks to James.

JAMES

Hard work.

DACEY

We need the money -- I say we try it.

Not waiting for an answer, she starts down the drive toward a farmhouse nestled in a circle of trees -- the others follow.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

The Tillermans approach the discouraged farmhouse, barn and rusted sheds. A LARGE DOG barks from behind a caged fence -- they stop, intimidated. The screen door opens: DAN RUDYARD, 40s, slender, wearing a flowered shirt beneath worn overalls, steps outside. The dog quiets, fawning and whimpering.

RUDYARD

Yeah?

DACEY

You have a sign out front,
pickers wanted. We, my brother
and me -- we'd like to apply.

He studies them through hard gray eyes.

DICEY (CONT'D)
We can work hard.
(no reply)
What do you pay?

RUDYARD
Fifty cents a bushel.

DICEY
Will you hire us?

He gestures toward Maybeth and Sammy.

RUDYARD
What about these two?

DICEY
They'll come with us and help.
They won't cause any trouble.

RUDYARD
Name's Rudyard, what's yours?

DICEY
Dicey.

Rudyard moves toward an old green pickup truck, eyeing Maybeth with a friendly smile -- she clings to Dicey.

RUDYARD
Get up in the back.

EXT. RUDYARD'S FARM - DAY

Rudyard drives behind his barn, then up an inclined dirt road cutting between fields of small fir trees planted on either side; the Tillermans bounce in the flatbed.

JAMES
(pointing)
Look it, this guy is growing
Christmas trees, he must be
rich, everybody buys a
Christmas tree, don't you
think?

DICEY

We didn't.

They head toward the upper fields.

EXT. TOMATO FIELDS - DAY

On his knees, Sammy sucks from a rusty water spigot; the others stand beside bushel baskets stacked at the edge of an overgrown field of ripened tomatoes. Rudyard studies them from his cab.

RUDYARD

See you at quittin' time.

JAMES

When's that?

RUDYARD

Now come on, boy, this ain't no summer camp.

Smiling, he accelerates out the farmers' lane.

JAMES

He's weird.

Sammy plops in a furrow, chomping a juicy tomato.

SAMMY

I like this job.

The others descend hungrily into the tomatoes.

EXT. TOMATO FIELDS (LATER)

Beneath a sweltering sun, their arms and legs scratched and smeared with dirt, Dicey pulls back the overgrowth for James to reach in and pick the tomato from the stem; Sammy and Maybeth, scratched and dirty, nap in a nearby furrow.

JAMES

It's too hot, Dicey.

She stands tip-toe to count filled baskets dotting the field.

DICEY
Fifteen baskets -- that's seven
dollars and fifty cents.

JAMES
What's this grandmother going
to be like?

DICEY
Probably poor. And maybe
strange.

JAMES
Strange? Like Momma? Crazy?

DICEY
I dunno. It sounded like she
lives all alone.

JAMES
Like us in P-town -- all by
ourselves out in the dunes.
Why is it Tillermans always
live alone?

DICEY
We don't. We live together.

JAMES
Together, but all alone
together.

DICEY
Maybe every family feels that
way. Maybe that's what
families are.

JAMES
I don't know. I don't think
so.

Dicey stoops to pull back the overgrown vines but her
fatigued helper hesitates.

DICEY
C'mon, James, stick with it.

He plops down with a groan, his eyes wavering between anger and self-pity.

JAMES

My back hurts and I'm hot.

DICEY

(snapping)

It's only for an afternoon.

She continues along the row. Sighing, he joins reluctantly.

EXT. TOMATO FIELDS - NIGHT

The truck headlights wash across the Tillermans seated beside twenty filled baskets. With the dog barking madly out the passenger window, Rudyard backs up so that the flatbed faces the baskets and the truck's nose points downhill toward the farmhouse. Suddenly flaring, he beats the dog to the floor.

RUDYARD

Shut up, you stupid mongrel mutt.

The children watch terrified as Rudyard gets out with a flashlight, yanking the whimpering dog on its leash.

DICEY

Mr. Rudyard, can you pay us now? Twenty baskets, that's ten dollars.

His glare fixes on Maybeth -- she grabs Dickey's hand.

RUDYARD

What's the hurry? I got your beds all made up back at the house.

DICEY

I don't think so. Our mom's expecting us and we have to get home.

RUDYARD

Home? And just where exactly
is your home?

Dicey falters, intimidated by his direct probe. He swills
from a pint bottle drawn from his pocket

DICEY

Just across the river.

The hint of a smile mars his frown.

RUDYARD

You're not much use. I'll just
have to teach you.

He scoops Maybeth into the air and lands her on the
flatbed, then drops Sammy beside her.

RUDYARD (CONT'D)

Now load up.

Carrying the flashlight, he crosses the field with his dog.

SAMMY

(teary)

I want to kill him and hit him.

Dicey peeks in the cab: the keys dangle from the ignition.

JAMES

He's crazy, Dicey. Bad crazy
...

DICEY

Shut up, James, now listen.

She helps Sammy and Maybeth off the flatbed.

DICEY (CONT'D)

When I say 'run,' you run, all
of you as fast as you can, you
hear?

They nod wide-eyed as Dicey slips inside the cab. She
looks across the way: Rudyard's turning on his sprinkler
system -- water sprays throughout the field. Dicey fumbles
for the key, turning it: nothing. She checks the

transmission box: the needle points to 'D.' She shifts to 'N' and turns the key again: the ENGINE FIRES.

DICEY

Run, James!

She looks over her shoulder: Rudyard and the dog gallop toward them. She cranks the shift to 'D' and punches the gas -- the pickup jerks forward. She throws herself out of the cab, hitting the ground hard. Wincing, she rolls to her feet -- the others stand frozen, watching her.

DICEY

GO!!!

She grabs Sammy and bounds across the tomato field. She lets James and Maybeth scoot past, then, on the run, checks behind: Rudyard chases his pickup cruising downhill toward the farmhouse but the dog pursues, howling, until its chain catches on a sprinkler head, stopping it in its tracks. Rabid, the dog charges again and again until it breaks free.

The Tillermans race into the adjacent FIELD, sprinting between towering rows of corn. At the end of the row, they charge through a line of small trees -- the earth gives way and they tumble into the river.

EXT. CHOPTANK RIVER - NIGHT

Dicey and Sammy break the surface gulping for air.

DICEY

James? Maybeth?!

They're just beyond her.

JAMES

Here. You okay?

SAMMY

It's warm.

From a distance, the HOWLING DOG.

DICEY

Stay close.

The Tillermans float downstream into the darkness.

EXT. CHOPTANK BANK - DAY

In early morning, Sammy pees in the river while Dicey spreads three soaked 'ONE DOLLAR BILLS' on a rock to dry, then opens her sopped map on the ground -- James watches over her shoulder.

EXT. TOMATO FIELD - DAY

Chomping tomatoes, the Tillermans cut across a field, their stride made difficult by the furrows of crumbly dirt.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The Tillermans walk single-file along a gravel shoulder until the sound of an APPROACHING VEHICLE sends them scrambling into the ditch for cover. A white Buick motors past, kicking up dust. They rise from the weeds and continue on.

EXT. HURLOCK - DAY

Carrying a small food bag, Dicey leads along the main street of Hurlock, a sprawly little town with one stoplight: everything's closed on this early Sunday morning; CHURCH BELLS CHIME. Sammy presses his face against a restaurant window, staring within.

DICEY

C'mon -- I've got bread and
peanut butter.

She administers a friendly collar, nudging him along.

JAMES

(pointing)

Look, Dicey -- a ferris wheel.

A few blocks away, a ferris wheel is visible just above the rooftops.

DICEY

That's nothing to do with us.

They walk on until the green pickup suddenly drives past, Rudyard and dog looking straight ahead.

JAMES

He didn't see us. I don't think he saw us. What can he do anyway?

Dacey glances around: her gaze locks onto the ferris wheel.

DICEY

Let's run, c'mon.

JAMES

But he didn't even turn around.

DICEY

Stop arguing, James.

She grabs Maybeth's hand and runs, James and Sammy right behind.

EXT. HURLOCK STREETS - DAY

Glancing fearfully over their shoulders, the Tillermans race through a quiet neighborhood toward the elementary school where a small traveling circus is set with Ferris wheel, Tilt-a-Whirl and Big Top. Suddenly the green pickup rounds a corner, speeding to cut them off.

EXT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - DAY

The Tillermans and truck converge at the playground -- Dacey scans for help but the circus isn't open yet.

DICEY

James -- go for the tent!

They dodge around his truck just as Rudyard jumps from the cab. Pulled by his snarling dog, he jogs easily after the children racing for the Big Top. Sammy trips -- Dacey turns to confront Rudyard while James rescues Sammy into the tent with Maybeth. Rudyard slows to a walk, playing out the chain-loops so the dog can almost bite her, all teeth and saliva.

DICEY (CONT'D)

There are people around here. You can't get away with it.

She backs away, ready to thrust her bag down the dog's throat. Suddenly she topples when THREE YAPPING TERRIERS charge past to greet the big dog. Dicey scrambles to her feet, a WHIP CRACKS: CLAIRE, late 30s, a tall beauty with flaming red hair, in spandex tights and high-heeled sandals, cracks her bullwhip inches from the canine's head, forcing the big dog to a whimpering crouch at Rudyard's side.

CLAIRE
Hold your dog.

Rudyard grips the dog's collar. The Terriers dance around Claire as other CIRCUS PERFORMERS emerge from the tent with the Tillermans -- Dicey edges toward them.

RUDYARD
(to Dicey)
Where you going?

He surveys the group.

RUDYARD (CONT'D)
They're my kids. Foster kids.

DICEY
No, we're not.

RUDYARD
Who's in charge here?

WILL HAWKINS, 40s, a black man with jawbone beard, clad in black, steps forward.

WILL
I am.

Rudyard seems surprised.

RUDYARD
Listen -- these here kids run off my farm yesterday and now their Momma's back home in tears over this. They gotta come back. We got papers.

Dicey steps up beside Will.

DICEY

That's a lie -- we don't belong
to him, we just met him
yesterday.

RUDYARD

Now don't start telling your
stories.

(to Will)

It's time for me to take these
kids home.

Will shifts his gaze from Rudyard to Dicey.

WILL

Okay -- if these are your
foster kids, then I'm sure you
won't mind telling me their
names.

RUDYARD

Hey, mister -- I was trying to
be nice with you but now you're
messin' with my family.

DICEY

He's a liar.

RUDYARD

Girl, don't you do this to me
in front of these people.

Will studies Dicey's fierce expression, then looks back to
Rudyard.

WILL

You best bring your papers and
a county sheriff to serve 'em.

Rudyard's eyes burn cold.

RUDYARD

(hissing)

Nigger.

Will doesn't flinch but Claire attacks cracking the whip at
Rudyard's feet, knees, and shoulders, steadily backing him
away.

CLAIRE
Get out. You make me sick.

Rudyard spits into the dirt.

RUDYARD
(to Dicey)
I am so disappointed in you --
this just gonna kill your
Momma.

He walks away with a big yank on the dog's chain. Claire lifts the whip a final time and snaps it sharply against his fanny -- Rudyard leaps forward, glancing back with a hateful glare. Dicey, her knees buckling, leans against Will and struggles not to cry. Her siblings gather around her.

WILL
Well, Claire.

CLAIRE
Well, Will ...

She kisses him full on the mouth.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
... let's just hope you're
right.

They lead the Tillermans into the Big Top, Will draping an arm around Dicey's shoulder.

INT. DINNER TENT - DAY

Dicey helps MATTIE, 65, the black cook, serve lunch to CIRCUS PERFORMERS seated at a large table, riveted by James' story.

JAMES
... and old Rudyard was running
as fast as he could, hollering
his head off.

He imitates RUDYARD'S HOLLER -- all roar with laughter, even Maybeth.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Dicey says the truck didn't
stop 'til it hit the barn.

More laughter.

INT. BIG TOP - DAY

Sammy, standing rigid under Claire's watchful eye, holds the hoops for terriers to jump through; up on the empty bleachers, Dicey and Will confer.

EXT. FERRIS WHEEL - DAY

James works with MR. URANKAR, 55, a stout, cigar smoker, as they make adjustments to the Ferris wheel's motor -- a delighted Maybeth is the sole passenger.

INT. WOOLWORTHS - DAY

Will and Claire pay a young CASHIER as she bags t-shirts, underwear, toothbrushes, toothpaste and combs for the grateful Tillermans.

EXT. MIDWAY - NIGHT

Mattie chaperones the Tillermans around the Midway bursting with TOWNSPEOPLE out for a night at the Circus.

INT. THE BIG TOP - NIGHT

A SPOTLIGHT POPS ON to illumine RINGMASTER WILL, in a tall hat with flowing red cape, bowing dramatically at center ring.

RINGMASTER WILL

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome
to the Hawkins Circus, the best
little circus East of the
Mississippi ...

The AUDIENCE APPLAUDS, including the happy Tillermans seated in the front row eating hot dogs and popcorn.

A CIRCUS MONTAGE through the eyes of the entranced Tillermans: CLOWNS; the HIGH WIRE ACROBAT; TRAPEZE ARTISTS; SAMSON the strong man. Finally Claire as the SNOW QUEEN and her ELFIN ASSISTANT Sammy jump the Terriers

through hoops -- Dicey, James and Maybeth laugh and laugh at their brother's antics.

INT. CLAIRE'S TRAILER - DAWN

In a sleeping bag on the floor, Dicey wakes to the sound of seven creatures deep in sleep: Claire snoring gently in her bunk, her red hair spread across the pillow; James and Maybeth together in the second bunk; Sammy nestled among the Terriers. Dicey smiles contentedly, then settles back to her pillow.

EXT. THE TRUCKS - DAY

Sammy kisses each Terrier good-bye, James shakes hands with Mr. Urankar, a couple of clowns escort Maybeth playfully into a station wagon and Claire wraps Dicey in a big embrace.

The car pulls away from the Big Top, the Tillermans bidding farewell to the circus folk all waving their fond good-byes.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Will drives a somber group of Tillermans, Dicey in front, the others in back, each in their own thoughts.

DICEY

Are you going to take us right there?

Nodding, Will gives Dicey a long look.

WILL

You don't want me to, do you?

DICEY

It's not that. It's -- this grandmother doesn't know we're coming, she doesn't even know we exist. And we heard some kinda weird stuff about her so I don't know how she'll act. You see, Momma ...

Her voice trails off with a sigh.

WILL

There's a lot you haven't told me, isn't there?

DICEY

It gets so complicated.

WILL

Wouldn't it be easier if I at least stuck close till you find her?

DICEY

Maybe, but -- I have to know by myself, for us. If that's all right.

They ride in SILENCE.

WILL

You know, Dicey -- I could still look into making some arrangements. It's not too late to stay with us, if you want.

Dicey looks to her expectant brothers and sister in the back seat, then back to Will. She shakes her head.

DICEY

We can't. James and Maybeth and Sammy have to go to school and we'll need to be in one place. Aren't you always traveling around?

He nods with a rueful smile.

WILL

Do you keep a promise?

(she nods)

Okay, then I tell you what -- I'll drop you off in town only if you promise me you'll call if you need help. We'll be in Berlin for a couple more days, the police can always find me.

DICEY

But what could you do?

WILL

Who knows? What do friends do
for each other? Something.
Whatever. Will you promise?

DICEY

Okay. I promise.

Will reaches across the seat to squeeze her hand.

WILL

Okay.

They lock eyes in mutual appreciation.

EXT. CRISFIELD - DAY

Crisfield: a forgotten town nestled on an Atlantic Bay. The Tillermans gaze at Will behind the wheel, not wanting to say good-bye. Will gives each child a last look, especially Dicey in whose determined face he recognizes something of himself. Concealing his emotion, he bangs the side of his car in farewell, then accelerates away. They watch until his car disappears from sight.

EXT. MILLIE'S GROCERY - DAY

Dicey mounts the steps of the vintage store, nodding matter-of-factly at a FEW OLD MEN sitting on a bus stop bench. She glances at a 'HAWKINS CIRCUS' poster in the store window, sighs, then enters.

INT. MILLIE'S GROCERY - DAY

Dicey allows her eyes to adjust to the dim light inside the dusty, unkempt store. She goes to the pay phone, opens a thin phone book and runs her finger down the 'T's. She frowns: 'TILLERMAN' is not listed.

MILLIE

(O.S.)

Something wrong?

MILLIE, a stout, thick-armed woman wearing a stained apron, appears from behind the counter with a meat cleaver in her hand.

DICEY

I was looking for the telephone number for Abigail Tillerman.

MILLIE

Why would you do that?

DICEY

I was going to call her up and see if she needed some help on her farm.

MILLIE

Ab won't hire you. She's letting the place go.

DICEY

Selling it?

Shaking her head, Millie leans on the counter.

MILLIE

Naw, she'd never sell that place. Besides, she hasn't had a phone since the day she came to town and threw it through the big plate glass window down at the phone company. You don't want to work for her.

She returns behind her meat counter as Dicey starts for the door, her mind churning.

DICEY

Where is her farm, anyway?

MILLIE

Down to the water, south.

DICEY

What road?

MILLIE

Landing Neck. It goes off
South Main, maybe a mile.
There's a bend out there with a
new little house right on it --
next mailbox is Ab's. But it's
about seven miles.

Dacey opens the door.

MILLIE (CONT'D)

I wouldn't go out there --
crazy as a coot, that's my
opinion. We leave her alone.
You should, too.

DICEY

Maybe you're right.

MILLIE

No maybes about it.

EXT. CRISFIELD DOCKS - DAY

Dacey joins her family sitting on a dock dangling their
feet over the water; the docks and sheds are mostly vacant
with crab pots and piles of oyster shells scattered
everywhere.

DICEY

You know what this is like?
It's like Provincetown. Isn't
it? It smells like it.

JAMES

Yeah. What about our
grandmother?

DICEY

She lives seven miles out of
town on Landing Neck Road.

JAMES

How do we get there?

DICEY

Listen, James -- I want to go out there alone. Just in case. I want you to stay here with the kids. And I'll come back for you when I know.

JAMES

Know what?

DICEY

If it's okay for us there.

JAMES

I don't like that, Dicey. What if you get in trouble?

DICEY

Better just me than all of us, right? If I don't come back, call the Berlin police and find Will. Here's the money, for lunch and anything.

JAMES

Okay, but I don't like it.

DICEY

I'm in charge, James. Remember?

She crouches by Maybeth and Sammy.

DICEY (CONT'D)

You do what James says, you hear?

(they nod)

That's all right then.

She stands quickly and hurries away, not looking back.

EXT. LANDING NECK ROAD - DAY

Accompanied by DISTANT BARKING and the DRONING BUZZ of insects, Dicey walks the dirt road. She slows her stride to pause before a rusted mailbox, it's post awry and 'TILLER' all that remains of its lettering. She checks inside: dead leaves and a styrofoam cup.

EXT. THE FARM - DAY

Dacey treads up the weedy drive through a grove of pine trees and a small orchard toward an OLD FARMHOUSE: a two-story faded white clapboard with an encircling screened porch; honeysuckle vines choke every inch of wood and window. Silent, vacant, neglected. Beyond the house, a dilapidated barn. Almost reluctantly, Dacey forges up rotting steps to knock on the door: some faint SCUFFLING NOISES inside. She knocks again: dead quiet. She tries the door: locked.

EXT. FARMHOUSE/BACK PORCH - DAY

Dacey walks apprehensively along the side of the house, its window shades drawn upstairs and down. She turns the corner: ABIGAIL TILLERMAN, seated on the porch steps, freezes Dacey with angry eyes. Ab's skin is darkly tanned, hair hacked helter-skelter, her blouse and skirt shapeless, her feet bare. Dacey swallows, twice, her throat suddenly dry.

DACEY
Mrs. Tillerman?

AB
You're trespassing.

DACEY
I thought I heard -- when I
knocked -- I didn't know if ...
(stepping forward)
The fact is, I wonder if you
would hire me to work for you.

She stands opposite Ab.

AB
The fact is you're trespassing.
Who told you to come here?

DACEY
Nobody. I heard you were alone
-- so I thought I'd try.

AB
I don't know you, do I?

DICEY
We're new here.

AB
Why aren't you in school?

DICEY
It's summer.

AB
Not for long.

Rising abruptly, she walks up the steps and through the screen door without looking back. Unsure, Dicey follows.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ab opens a can of spaghetti, dishes it fiercely into a saucepan, then tosses it onto the burner; the kitchen is well-kept, all wood and porcelain.

AB
I didn't say come in.

DICEY
You never said if you wanted me to work.

Ab studies the girl. Dicey studies the woman's feet caked with dirt.

AB
How do I know you're not going to rob me?

DICEY
I'm not. It doesn't look like you have much to steal anyway.

AB
(grunting)
Where do you live?

DICEY

In town. I can work hard --
your barn needs painting, and
the screens and the steps need
...

AB

I'm not too old to do that.

DICEY

I can pick and weed.

AB

(dishing herself
spaghetti)

So can I. So can anybody. You
better get down a bowl, since
you've invited yourself for
lunch.

Ab sits at a table big enough for ten people, its wood
scrubbed to a smooth finish. Dicey dishes some spaghetti,
then sits opposite her. Ab shovels large spoonfuls into
her mouth. Dicey nibbles the red mush.

AB (CONT'D)

You like my spaghetti?

DICEY

No, but I'm hungry.

AB

You know what I sometimes
think?

(chewing lustily)

I sometimes think people might
be good to eat. Cows and
chickens eat corn and grass and
turn it into good meat. People
eat cows and chickens. In
people, it might turn into
something even better. Ever
think about that?

Dicey shakes her head.

AB (CONT'D)
Especially babies. Or children
-- more tender. Do you have
brothers and sisters?

DICEY
No.

AB
Who told you I was alone?

DICEY
The lady in the grocery store.

AB
Millie. What did she say about
me?

DICEY
Nothing much.

AB
She tell you I was crazy?

Dicey looks into her bowl, slowly spooning the mush.

AB (CONT'D)
My husband's dead these four
years and more.

DICEY
I'm sorry.

AB
I'm not -- I'm happy since he
died.

DICEY
Why?

AB
He kept wanting his shoes
polished. Never did polish
them himself. First thing I
did, I bought myself a washing
machine. Do you play the
piano?

DICEY

No.

AB

Too bad. I've got one.
Haven't played it myself, never
had time. My children did but
they died, too, all three of
'em. That was a relief. What
do you think about death? Or
don't you think?

Dicey meets her gaze.

DICEY

I think it's a quiet place, at
the end, where you can rest and
you don't have to fight
anymore.

AB

(grunting)

Not quite, not for the maggots
and worms.

DICEY

I wouldn't care about that if I
was dead.

Dicey stands to go, not even feeling bad, not feeling
anything except maybe glad that she had come out here by
herself.

AB

You're going.

(Dicey nods)

You didn't offer to help with
the dishes. No, don't bother.
I know what children are like.

Dicey heads for the door.

AB (CONT'D)

Don't you want to know if I
want you to work for me?

Dicey pauses with her hand on the screen.

AB (CONT'D)
Well I don't. Couldn't pay you
anyway.

Dacey nods and goes out the door -- Ab grips the edge of
the table, pitching her voice loud.

AB (CONT'D)
I know who you are, you hear
me?
I know who you are and you
can't stay here.

Dacey hovers on the back porch before deciding to return to
the threshold.

DICEY
Then who am I?

AB
I knew the minute you knocked
on the door, that's why I went
out back -- a polite person
would have gone away.

Dacey holds her ground, still awaiting an answer.

AB (CONT'D)
Oh, I know who you are --
you're the oldest one, I can't
remember your name. There's a
foolish letter here, somewhere,
has all your names in it.

DICEY
You don't know who I am.

AB
You're Liza's daughter, some
ungodly name she gave you, her
and that Francis.

DICEY
Who's the letter from?

AB

Connecticut. What's her name,
she's just like her mother -- a
maudlin, simpering fool.

DICEY

Cousin Eunice?

AB

That's it. One's retarded, the
letter said. Never says 'boo.'
Is she?

DICEY

No. Not that it concerns you.

AB

You're right. It doesn't
concern me one whit. So
where's the rest -- you ditch
'em somewhere?

DICEY

They're waiting for me in town.
A polite person wouldn't have
pretended not to know me.

AB

Never said I had good manners.
Never had any manners to say
anything about.

DICEY

My name is Dicey.

AB

That's right, I remember now.
It was in the letter. I'm not
crazy.

DICEY

I know. I'm going now.

AB

Suit yourself. Where are you
all planning to sleep tonight?

DICEY
We're moving on. We don't need
a place to stay.

AB
Don't you lie to me, girl --
you're runaways.

DICEY
There's no point in staying
here.

AB
I said sleep, not stay.
There's no reason not to sleep
here, is there?

Dicey sizes up her grandmother.

DICEY
Yes. I think there is.

AB
(grunting)
You'll sleep here tonight
because you've got nowhere else
to go.

DICEY
We do, too.

AB
Then why did you come traipsing
down here five hundred miles to
find me? Now answer me that!

They glare at one another across the kitchen, neither one
backing down. Finally Ab's lips twitch, spilling laughter.

AB (CONT'D)
Two of a kind we are. Poor
Liza. Two of a kind.

She rinses their bowls in the sink.

DICEY
Okay, but ...

AB
But what? Be nice to them?
Nicer than I was to you?

DICEY
Yeah.

She dries her hands on her skirt.

AB
I'm not promising anything.
Let's get going.

She brushes past Dicey out the door.

EXT. FARMER'S LANE - DAY

Hustling to keep pace with her grandmother's long, easy stride, Dicey follows Ab along a dirt path cutting between two well-kept vegetable fields: tomatoes, corn, squash and beans. Ahead, Dicey sees the marsh grass, then the sparkling bay.

EXT. DOCK - DAY

Dicey seats herself on the center bench of a bright red, fifteen-foot open boat. Ab unties from the weathered dock, tossing the rope on Dicey's lap.

AB
Coil that.

She jumps into the skiff and yanks the starter coil, firing the outboard motor.

EXT. THE BAY/SKIFF - DAY

Seated with her back to Ab, Dicey inhales the salty air as the boat cuts through the water. Ab pilots grim-faced.

EXT. CRISFIELD HARBOR - DAY

The boat chugs into the harbor, its perimeter dotted with fishermen's shacks and piles of oyster shells.

DICEY
(pointing)
Over there.

Nodding, Ab steers expertly to the DOCK, tying at its far end. Dicey hoists herself onto the boards, Ab climbs the wooden ladder. Dicey scans the dock: empty.

DICEY (CONT'D)
(calling)
James. James!

Fighting panic, she turns to Ab.

DICEY (CONT'D)
I don't know. You go up that side, look in stores and restaurants. I'll go up this side.

She hurries along the dock with Ab not far behind.

SAMMY
(O.S.)
Dicey!

Sammy's running toward her from the shade of a nearby shack.

DICEY
Sammy!

She runs across the shells to meet him, catching his hand.

SAMMY
I told James.

DICEY
Told him what? I'll tell you, I was scared.

SAMMY
Told him you'd be back.

DICEY
Where is he? Where's Maybeth?

SAMMY
They walked out to the farm.

Dacey angrily scuffs her foot in the shells as Ab arrives in time to size up this 6-year-old ball of energy.

SAMMY (CONT'D)

We waited a long time then
James said you were wrong we
should've all gone together
then he said I had to do what
he said but I said 'no' but he
said you said to and I said you
said to stay here and do what
he said, not go off because he
said to. So he took Maybeth.

DICEY

He thinks he's so smart.
(to Ab)
And he is smart -- but I told
them to stay here. I told him.

SAMMY

Are you the grandmother?
(Ab nods)
What am I s'posed to call you?

She pretends not to hear the question.

AB

Let's get back.

DICEY

What about James and Maybeth?
I can't just leave them.

AB

You already did. They'll make
their own way.

She hustles back toward the dock -- Dacey and Sammy follow at a distance, whispering.

SAMMY

What's it like?

DICEY

Run down.

SAMMY
Are we going to stay?

DICEY
(shaking her head)
Just tonight.

SAMMY
That's okay, Dicey.

Draping an arm around his shoulder, Dicey leads onto the dock.

EXT. THE BAY/SKIFF - DAY

Their backs to the grandmother, Dicey and Sammy sit on the bow seat savoring the windy ride.

EXT. FARMER'S LANE - DAY

They walk through the marsh grass, Ab at the lead followed by Sammy hustling to keep pace followed by Dicey, who cranes her neck hoping for a glimpse of James. Impatient, Dicey breaks into a run, passing Ab on the narrow path. Sammy follows, scooting past Ab with a purposeful look.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Dicey sprints around to the front door: they aren't there. Sammy arrives out of breath.

DICEY
I'm going to find them. Do you
want to come or stay?

SAMMY
Stay.

DICEY
She's not friendly.

SAMMY
Neither am I.

Dicey can't help but smile before running down the drive toward the road.

EXT. LANDING NECK ROAD - DAY

Dacey emerges from the pine grove to discover James and Maybeth standing by Ab's mailbox. James, looking both worried and relieved, picks up the bag and hustles toward her. Dacey walks slowly, awaiting his explanation.

JAMES

Sammy's alone downtown. I'll go back and get him. If everything's okay.

DICEY

Everything's not okay, but Sammy's here. She doesn't have a car, she uses a boat. That wasn't very smart, James.

JAMES

I thought it was, when I started out.

DICEY

Well, don't worry. She doesn't want us to stay, but we can sleep here tonight.

JAMES

Then what? Should we call Will?

DICEY

I dunno yet.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Clinging to a branch way up in a big Mulberry tree, Sammy spies his family's somber return.

SAMMY

(calling down)

I was right, James, wasn't I?

They look up to see Sammy sliding down the Mulberry, stopping at the bottom where its four massive trunks converge.

SAMMY (CONT'D)

We went in a boat!

DICEY

Anyway, this is where Momma
lived.

MAYBETH

It's beautiful.

DICEY

It's a wreck. She hasn't taken
care of it.

JAMES

But it's big. Big enough for
all of us.

DICEY

Who cares, we won't be staying.

AB

True enough.

The Tillermans turn: Ab's standing at the corner of the
house.

AB (CONT'D)

But you'll be here for supper
so there's work to be done. I
see you found them.

(staring at James)

James.

He tries to smile but her expression discourages him.

AB (CONT'D)

And Maybeth.

Her eyes flicker over the little girl -- Maybeth moves
closer to Dicey.

AB (CONT'D)

I've got crab pots set down by
the dock. Who'll fetch the
crabs?

DICEY

I will.

SAMMY

Me, too.

AB

James and Sammy will, there's a basket by the back steps. I eat early and so will you.

The boys run off.

AB (CONT'D)

You two come with me. I'll show you where to sleep.

She strides around to the back. Dicey picks up the bag and follows with Maybeth clinging to her hand.

INT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Ab leads through the kitchen and into a hallway. She points to a closed door.

AB

That's my room.
(pointing to another closed door)
And that's my bathroom.

At the end of the hall, they ascend a staircase.

INT. UPSTAIRS - DAY

Ab stops at the top step, allowing the girls to pass into a long U-shaped hallway with five closed doors.

AB

That's the bathroom at the far end. Sheets are in one of the bureaus. I can't recollect which.

She descends abruptly, leaving Dicey and Maybeth alone in the dim hallway.

DICEY

(whispering)
Cripes. It's like a ghost house.

Maybeth looks around with frightened eyes.

DICEY (CONT'D)
Look at it this way, Maybeth --
it's only for one night.

She opens the nearest door.

INT. FIRST BEDROOM - DAY

They discover a room with a plain wood bureau, desk, chair, wardrobe and iron bedstead overlaid with a white quilt. Dicey snaps up the shade: the room faces the big Mulberry tree. Dicey and Maybeth open the windows and brace them with pieces of wood -- sunlight and fresh air!

INT. SECOND BEDROOM - DAY

Entranced, they enter a smaller room almost identical to the first except for a child's rocker in the corner. Dicey pops the shade -- Maybeth points delightedly to a child's PAINTING of INDIANS IN HEADDRESS AND WARPAINT on the front of the wardrobe.

INT. THIRD BEDROOM - DAY

This door opens to the same iron bedstead but with a multi-colored quilt. Dicey snaps the shade: the light reveals a child's WALL PAINTING of a SAILBOAT ON BLUE WATER. She holds the windows while Maybeth sets the braces.

BACK YARD - DICEY'S POV

The barn, planted fields, the long stretch of marshland, and the sparkling ocean bay. A straw-hatted Ab is picking vegetables in the fields.

BACK TO:

DICEY

She sighs wistfully: paradise.

INT. THE FOURTH BEDROOM - DAY

Dicey and Maybeth find a ruffled quilt and on this wardrobe, a child's CHALK MURAL of a CASTLE WITH QUEEN,

KING AND COURT; faded magazine pictures of ladies in frilly dresses are pasted on the wall.

DICEY

Well. This isn't bad, is it?

Maybeth smiles, enchanted.

DICEY (CONT'D)

It's only for a night. Let's each take our own room. Which one do you think was Momma's?

MAYBETH

This one.

DICEY

Then you'll sleep here, okay?

Maybeth nods happily.

EXT. VEGETABLE FIELDS - DAY

Maybeth follows Dicey like a shadow along the dirt path to where Ab picks tomatoes, storing them in a burlap shoulder sack.

DICEY

We can do that.

AB

(without looking up)

And so can I. They're coming in too fast -- always do this time of year, gotta start canning.

(nodding toward
Maybeth)

Can she pick beans?

DICEY

Can you?

Maybeth doesn't answer.

DICEY (CONT'D)

Sure, I guess so.

AB
Over there then.

Jabbing with her head to the other side of the field, she drops a sack at Maybeth's feet.

AB (CONT'D)
Bring 'em back here to me.
Take the biggest.
(to Dicey)
You, go into the barn --
there's a bin of potatoes up
against the far wall. Get as
many as we need.

Dicey gives Maybeth a reassuring nod then starts for the barn.

AB (CONT'D)
(calling after)
And keep your shoes on, I don't
know what-all's on that floor.

INT. BARN - DAY

Dicey stands inside the cavernous barn, her eyes adjusting to the dim light: a large shape looms at the center; RUSTLING SOUNDS come from the upper lofts. She approaches the large shape and peeks beneath its tarp: a FIFTEEN-FOOT SAILBOAT balanced on sawhorses, its ropes tangled, its mast fallen, its cock-pit full of cobwebs. For Dicey, a pot of gold.

EXT. DOCK - DAY

Sprawled on the dock, James and Sammy study several complicated crab pots. James positions their pail before one of the pots, then opens the hatch: not a crab budes. Impatient, Sammy lifts one end -- crabs bolt from the trap and scuttle back to the sea midst the YELLING BOYS.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Though secretly watching her grandmother, Maybeth stares at the colander of green beans on the table while Ab, stealing glances at her 'retarded' grand-daughter, fills a big pot with water and sets it on the stove. Dicey enters with the potatoes, setting them on the table.

AB

Take 'em to the sink, don't you
know potatoes have to be
scrubbed?

Nodding, Dicey transfers the potatoes to the sink and turns
on the water.

AB (CONT'D)

Can she take the ends off
beans?

DICEY

Sure.

Ab sets the colander in front of Maybeth, then watches
skeptically as the little girl carefully snaps the end off
each bean, building a neat little pile.

DICEY (CONT'D)

There's a boat in the barn.

AB

I know that. Been there for
years.

DICEY

Whose boat is it?

AB

Mine.

DICEY

I know that, but whose?

AB

One of my boys built it. He
built it and he sailed it.

DICEY

Where are the sails? Will it
still float?

AB

I don't know if it's seaworthy.
It doesn't concern you.

Still scrubbing potatoes, Dicey feels her back stiffen from the cold finality of her grandmother's remark.

AB (CONT'D)

I can hear what you're thinking.

Dicey turns to meet Ab's dark gaze.

DICEY

Maybe you can.

The stand-off is interrupted when James and Sammy arrive with a full basket of crabs, both too excited to care about their grandmother's stony silence.

SAMMY

You should have seen them -- they looked at the door then they looked at us and then ...

He thrusts his arms out and wiggles his fingers.

SAMMY (CONT'D)

... gone! I didn't know things could go sideways so fast. Boy, are they smart.

JAMES

We closed the doors and set the traps back where they were. Is that right?

AB

Right enough. What did you use for bait?

JAMES

I didn't think. What should we use?

AB

Fish. You have to catch the fish.

SAMMY

Goodo! Can I go down after dinner? Do you have any line?

Ab checks the water now boiling on the stove.

AB
No point to it.

DICEY
So what? I'll go with you,
Sammy.
(defiantly to Ab)
We like fishing.

Ab doesn't answer but instead pours the crabs into the boiling water, then slams the lid. The children listen in distress to the CRABS SCRABBLING for escape. With her hand firmly on the lid, Ab stares evenly at the children -- Maybeth buries her face against her sister. Dicey holds her grandmother's gaze until there's only SILENCE.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The Tillermans learn to eat Maryland crabs by watching Ab - - everybody's hands are busy but almost nobody's mouth is full; there are plentiful servings of green beans, potatoes and tomatoes. Too curious to keep her silence, Ab addresses a question to the crab plate at the center of the table.

AB
So where's your mother?

JAMES
We don't know.

AB
Police can't find her?

DICEY
Not yet.

AB
So you run away from someone
who was trying to help you --
why'd you do that?

The others look to Dicey.

DICEY
It wasn't right for us.

AB
What, you think other people
are supposed to jump up and
down just because you say so?

Dicey meets her look.

AB (CONT'D)
What about your father -- did
he run away, too?

JAMES
He left right after Sammy got
born.

AB
She should've come back here
when he ran out on her.

SAMMY
She didn't want to.

AB
How do you know?

SAMMY
I can't remember but it made
her cry.

AB
What does it matter anyway.

SAMMY
Momma matters to me.

AB
She went off and left you.

SAMMY
She wanted to come back.

AB
How do you know that?

SAMMY

Because she loved me. Didn't
she, Dicey?

DICEY

Yes, she did. She loved us
all.

AB

Humph.

She reaches for another crab.

EXT. DOCK - DAY

Beneath the setting sun, Dicey swims in a slow crawl away from the land. She stops to rest, treading water, gazing back at her family: James and Maybeth are jumping off the dock while Sammy fishes. In the distance, the golden fields and old farmhouse all by itself.

INT. KITCHEN - TWILIGHT

The Tillermans parade past Ab washing some clothes in the sink. Each says "GOOD NIGHT" -- Ab nods but says nothing.

INT. SAMMY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Sammy watches the family gathering from beneath his bedcovers; his sisters are on the bed, James sits in the child's rocker beside the 'Indian' wardrobe.

JAMES

What're we going to do
tomorrow?

DICEY

She doesn't want us to stay.
She said so.

SAMMY

Well neither do I -- even if it
is fun.

DICEY

What about you, James?

JAMES
It would be okay here.

DICEY
Maybeth?

She looks at her hands then to Sammy then back to Dicey.

MAYBETH
You want to, don't you?

Dicey reaches a decision.

DICEY
In the morning I say we get started on something useful, before she wakes up. That way, she'll have to keep us here for the day. If she tells us to go, we can say we will, as soon as we finish the job.

JAMES
But what if she means it?

DICEY
She does mean it. That's the trouble, isn't it? Look, we pretend we're not even thinking about staying here but every day we do some work that needs to be done so it's worth her while to keep us. If we get her to put it off, maybe she'll get used to us and forget that she wants us to go away.

SAMMY
I don't think she likes me.

DICEY
That doesn't matter, Sammy. It's not her I'm thinking about. It's us. This was our Momma's house. Okay?

She looks around the room -- each Tillerman nods their assent.

DICEY (CONT'D)
That's okay then.

EXT. PORCH - NIGHT

Rocking in her porch swing, Abigail listens to the CHILDREN SING "THE WATER IS WIDE," a hauntingly familiar melody that drifts over the quiet marshland.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAWN

A faint glimmer of light rims the Eastern sky. The old house is dark downstairs but upstairs, there's a light in every window.

INT. STAIRWAY - DAY

Four pair of sneakered feet pad down the creaky oak stairs.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

The Tillermans ease from the porch into chilly dawn air. The others watch shivering as Dicey clutches the first strand of honeysuckle. She pulls: the strand surrenders its grip bit by bit from a blanket of interwoven tendrils covering the entire house. The others reach into the plants and pull.

EXT. FARMHOUSE (LATER)

The sun shines bright on a large mound of honeysuckle piled at the edge of the lawn -- the Tillermans work determinedly.

JAMES
I'm hungry. This is going to
take all day.

DICEY
I hope so. Anyway, let's see
what there is to eat.

Sammy battles a last tendril before running after the others.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY

They troop up the porch steps only to pause at the screen door: Ab's at the stove making pancakes on a large griddle.

AB
Wash your hands. I see that
you don't make your own beds.

DICEY
I'll do that.

AB
No -- you'll each do your own.

Dicey and James share a worried glance as they parade inside.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The Tillermans breakfast on pancakes smothered with strawberry jam. Finally Ab speaks.

AB
I like that honeysuckle.

Dicey freezes mid-bite.

AB (CONT'D)
That honeysuckle's been there a
long time. It's the kind of
tenacious plant I have to
respect.

JAMES
Honeysuckle is parasitic. It
can be trained and kept back
but if it proliferates without
controls, it chokes out other
growth.

SAMMY
It's bad.

Ab studies James -- he slathers another pancake with jam.

AB
Where'd you learn a word like
proliferate?

He shrugs, his mouth too full to answer.

AB (CONT'D)

The honeysuckle will take you
all day. At least.

Dacey feigns disinterest.

AB (CONT'D)

You can't just leave those
vines piled up. They have to
go out on the marsh.

Dacey, chewing hard to keep from smiling, looks up to meet her grandmother's gaze. She swallows hastily.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Stripped down to their shorts, the Tillermans sing "OLD LADY WHO SWALLOWED A FLY" as they labor beneath the hot mid-day sun. Ab strides with purse in hand off the back porch, heading toward the dock.

EXT. DOCK - DAY

Stripped down to their underwear, James lies dripping wet on the dock, Sammy cannonballs off the end and Maybeth wades in the shallow water searching for shells; the boat is missing. In the marsh grass behind them is a large mound of honeysuckle. Dacey breaks the surface of the water gulping for air.

JAMES

Where do you think she went?

DACEY

I dunno.

JAMES

We ought to clear that
honeysuckle by the barn.

Dacey climbs out to sit on the dock.

JAMES (CONT'D)

She said she liked it, didn't she? If we trimmed it, we could make it like a hedge.

DICEY

We don't have anything to cut it with.

JAMES

You could ask.

DICEY

No, I can't. Don't you see? We can't ask, we just have to do things. We can't give her a chance to say no, because if we do then that's what she'll say.

She springs up to put on her shorts.

DICEY (CONT'D)

C'mon, we've got to get back to work.

All reluctantly comply.

INT. BARN - DAY

Brushing past cobwebs, Dicey makes her way to the back of the barn where she finds a well-ordered tool bench. She selects two pair of clippers. Departing, she hesitates by the tarped sail boat to gently run her hand along its gunnel, dreaming from stern to bow.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

James and Maybeth use clippers to trim the honeysuckle hedge while Dicey and Sammy continue to yank tendrils from the side of the house. Dicey sees Ab walking through the vegetable fields with two large grocery bags.

DICEY

(calling)

James, go help her.

He dashes off, meeting her at the edge of the lawn.

AB
Front must be clear by the size
of that pile in the marsh.

James reaches for the bags.

AB (CONT'D)
There's more in the boat.

He runs off toward the dock. Ab approaches the porch, breaking stride to absorb the farmhouse, strangely familiar free of its vegetation. Sammy, trying to show off, leans back with all his might, snapping a tendril from the roof - he tumbles onto his fanny, the vine wrapping around him. Ab laughs as Sammy struggles to free himself from the tangle of leaves.

SAMMY
What's so funny?

AB
You are.

Sammy laughs, too. Ab looks to Maybeth, working the clippers.

AB (CONT'D)
Can she use clippers? Is it
safe for her?

DICEY
(irritated)
Ask her yourself. She's not
deaf.

AB
Well, when you're done you
better rub those tools down
with a tack cloth or they'll
rust. I have groceries to put
away.

Dicey watches her go.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ab watches the children gather at the table with wet heads and shining faces. At each setting, there's a plate of

fried chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes and a tall glass of milk; a store-bought cake awaits on the counter.

AB

You did a good day's work. I suppose you'll be moving on tomorrow.

Dacey takes a deep breath.

DICEY

There's still honeysuckle to be pulled.

AB

Don't know why you carried it so far into the marsh. You could leave it up to the near end and it'll rot away by spring. James, you look like you could use another piece of chicken.

Dacey can finally exhale.

INT. KITCHEN - TWILIGHT

The Tillermans sing "TURN, TURN, TURN" while Dacey washes dishes, the little ones dry and James puts away in the cabinets. Ab, returning from the fields with a sack of vegetables, listens from the doorway, her expression obscured by the darkness. Suddenly aware of her presence, the Tillermans bring the song to a premature close -- Ab eases inside.

AB

I'll give you this much, your Momma taught you how to sing.

JAMES

Did you sing to our Momma?

AB

I don't recall.

She sorts her vegetables on the counter.

AB (CONT'D)

If you want to wash any clothes, tonight's the time -- I'll be using this sink for canning tomorrow.

(Dicey nods)

Where'd you hear that song?

DICEY

A friend taught it to us. Someone we met along the way.

SAMMY

Windy.

AB

Windy who?

DICEY

I don't know, it was at a college.

AB

What were you doing at a college?

Dicey looks to the family chronicler.

JAMES

Well, we were just coming into New Haven. It was late and it was raining ...

Sammy and Maybeth sit at the table, eager to hear their story; Ab pauses her work, listening to every word.

JAMES (CONT'D)

... and we were out of money all together ...

Dicey watches Ab watching James.

EXT. BACK YARD - NIGHT

Dicey hangs four pair of socks, underwear, t-shirts and shorts from a clothesline.

KITCHEN - DICEY'S POV

Beyond the screen door Sammy and Maybeth sleep at the table while James continues to tell Ab their story.

BACK TO:

DICEY

She listens to JAMES' VOICE fade under the WIND IN THE PINES and the FROGS CROAKING from the marsh. She looks above, to the myriad of twinkling stars.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Dicey passes through the kitchen, now dark and empty. She pauses by Ab's closed bedroom door, a shaft of light visible beneath its sill. She hesitates, unsure.

DICEY
(tentatively)
Good night.

AB
(AFTER SEVERAL BEATS)
Good night.

Dicey smiles, then bounds up the stairs.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAWN

A faint glimmer of light rims the Eastern sky; the old house is dark downstairs but upstairs, there's a light in every window.

INT. STAIRWAY - DAY

Four pair of sneakered feet pad down the creaky oak stairs.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Dicey and Sammy mend torn window screens with hammer and nails.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Bearing mops and buckets, James and Maybeth slide open heavy oak doors leading to the shuttered living room. They open the shades: sunlight reveals a piano, fireplace, big

sofa, wide desk and walls of book shelves. Abandoning his bucket, an awed James begins to scan the books. Maybeth goes to the piano and ceremoniously opens its cover -- she softly picks out the melody to "THE WATER IS WIDE" as James settles into a big easy chair with an old hardcover: The Time Machine, the very book he'd left behind at the Peewauket Mall.

EXT. LANDING NECK ROAD - DAY

Dacey carefully re-paints the word 'TILLERMAN' on Ab's mailbox. She stands back to admire her work when a mail truck pulls to a stop. A friendly MAILMAN hands her a single letter, then motors away. Dacey looks at the letter with its ominous return address: EUNICE LOGAN, 1724 OCEAN DRIVE, BRIDGEPORT, CT.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ab washes dozens of tomatoes in the sink; on the stove, glass jars boil in their steaming pots. Dacey enters to deliver the letter -- Ab gives it a glance then tucks it inside her pocket before continuing her chores.

AB

Will you be moving on tomorrow?

DICEY

Your mailbox needs bracing, and there's some patching to be done on the barn. You have wood in there, don't you?

AB

It's going to rain. There's storms brewing.

Unsure of what to say, Dacey retreats outside. Ab sits in her chair by the window and opens the letter. She looks at an enclosed Polaroid: a vacant-faced Liza Tillerman stares from a hospital bed. Ab doesn't notice James crossing the room. He pauses by the screen door.

JAMES

Those books in the library -- are they all yours?

Ab looks up, a pained look on her face, which she quickly covers.

AB

No, not mine. My husband was a reading man, for all the good it did him.

JAMES

What do you mean?

AB

He got all his answers out of books. Books don't change and he liked that.

JAMES

What's the matter with that? People put down what happened before you were even born and you can understand and not make the same mistakes. Like history.

AB

The past is gone.

JAMES

But it shouldn't be forgotten, should it?

AB

Sometimes. Sometimes it's better.

James contemplates his next question.

AB (CONT'D)

Well, don't let me hold you up.

She goes back to her letter. Dismissed, he goes outside.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

The subdued Tillermans eat a crab supper in silence. With a weary sigh, Ab draws the Bridgeport letter from the pocket of her dress.

AB

I guess everybody knows I got another letter from your cousin.

She takes a deep breath.

AB (CONT'D)

Apparently she now believes it's her God-given duty to take care of you. She's making arrangements, I don't know what-all, something about you girls with her and the boys with a family not too far away.

DICEY

But ...

AB

No 'buts' girl -- what happens in life isn't always up to us. And there's news about your mother but I'm afraid it's not good.

The children sit chastened, dreading the worst.

AB (CONT'D)

They found her.

DICEY

Who did? Where?

AB

The police. Up around Boston. They got her in some state hospital, a mental ward. She ...

They stare in stunned silence.

AB (CONT'D)

You know what catatonic means?

Dacey shakes her head.

AB (CONT'D)

It means she won't respond to anything. Your mother -- well, she doesn't do anything, doesn't speak, doesn't seem to hear what's said to her, won't feed herself, won't move at all. Nothing.

DICEY

Are they sure it's Momma?

Ab passes the Polaroid to Dicey -- they gather round, transfixed by this haunting image of their mother.

DICEY (CONT'D)

They cut her hair. (BEAT) Is she going to get better?

AB

They don't think so.

Sammy bangs his fists on the table.

SAMMY

You mean old lady!

He runs from the room -- Dicey follows, with Maybeth right behind. James looks to Ab, then he, too, hurries upstairs. Sighing wearily, Ab begins to clear the dishes.

INT. SAMMY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

James finds Dicey comforting a tearful Sammy and Maybeth on the bed, an arm around each -- Sammy lifts his head from her lap.

SAMMY

She'll get better maybe. I don't care what they say. I won't believe them.

Dicey, struggling not to cry, grins at her brother's stubbornness.

MAYBETH

I'm sorry, Dicey.

DICEY

Me, too.

She buries her face in Maybeth's hair.

DICEY (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, too.

Blinking back his tears, James goes to the window:
RAINDROPS PATTER against the glass.

JAMES

What if we can't work outside
tomorrow? Do you think she'll
make us leave?

Dicey fights to regain her composure, wiping the moisture from her eyes. James watches the rain cascade through the leaves of the big Mulberry tree. A LIGHTNING FLASH. Dicey goes to comfort him -- he leans against his sister, tears running down his cheeks.

EXT. PORCH - NIGHT

Rocking on her porch swing, Abigail listens to the THUNDER and the faint sound of CHILDREN CRYING above.

INT. STAIRWAY - DAY

Dicey leads the solemn parade down the stairs; outside, a BIG RAIN.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The Tillermans enter to find Ab -- her face flushed, hair wet and feet caked with mud -- running water into a canning pot at the sink; a basket of tomatoes sits on the table.

AB

You could help me. I need the
ripe tomatoes picked, and the
squashes and cukes that are
along the ground. Drainage is
so bad they'll rot if we don't
get them in.

Not needing to be asked twice, the children discard shoes and shirts by the porch door, then, sharing relieved grins,

take off into the torrential rain with stacks of bushel baskets.

EXT. BACK YARD - DAY

Hammered by the rain, they run for the fields.

DICEY

You guys get the tomatoes.
Sammy, cucumbers. I'll do the
squash.

EXT. SQUASH FIELD - DAY

Mud oozes up through her toes as Dicey searches under the large leaves to find yellow squash. She drops to her knees and tosses the squash into her basket, moving quickly down the row.

EXT. TOMATO FIELD - DAY

James and Maybeth work side-by-side, so drenched they share a big grin.

EXT. CUCUMBER FIELD - DAY

Dicey finds Sammy working stark naked over the cucumber plants. Grinning, she collects one of his full baskets.

INT. BACK PORCH - DAY

Dicey struggles up the steps with the basket of cucumbers, setting it beside half-a-dozen other dripping baskets, then races back to the fields.

EXT. TOMATO FIELD - DAY

Dicey helps with the tomatoes. Sammy's fanny gleams white on his tan body as he stoops to pick beside Maybeth. Maybeth uses only her left hand, holding her right arm stiffly at her side.

EXT. BACK YARD - DAY

Bearing her basket, Dicey passes Sammy cartwheeling naked in the long grass, entirely happy. Up ahead, Ab holds the porch door open for Maybeth, then for James struggling with

his final basket. Ab watches Sammy with a smile in her eyes.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Showered and combed, the Tillermans breakfast on bowls of hot oatmeal with brown sugar and milk; glass jars boil in the huge pot rattling on the stove. Maybeth reaches awkwardly for the pitcher of milk and splashes it over the table. Ab storms from her chair and throws a dishcloth at Maybeth.

AB
Can't you even feed yourself?
Mop it up.

Mopping the spill, Maybeth knocks her bowl, nearly toppling it.

AB (CONT'D)
What's the matter with you?

Maybeth, her face white, stares into her cereal bowl. Dicey finishes mopping the spill.

AB (CONT'D)
Answer me.
(to Dicey)
Or is this the way she usually
is and it's all been an act
until now.

DICEY
Something's wrong with her arm.

AB
What something?

DICEY
I dunno -- she says it hurts.

AB
How long has it hurt?

DICEY
Since yesterday morning.

AB
(to Maybeth)
Why didn't you say something?

Maybeth stares. Exasperated, Ab pulls Maybeth's chair back from the table.

AB (CONT'D)
You come with me.

She storms out of the room tugging Maybeth by her good arm. The others look at one another, concerned.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Maybeth sits timidly on the edge of the claw-footed tub while Ab rummages the medicine cabinet; the toilet is old-fashioned with a long pull-chain.

AB
Most likely just a pulled
tendon -- you'd really be
yelling if you broke it, unless
you yell as much as you talk.

She opens a jar of ointment -- Maybeth draws back.

AB (CONT'D)
Now please stand still when
somebody's trying to help you.

Maybeth stares submissively at the ground while Ab massages the ointment into her forearm and elbow.

AB (CONT'D)
Yanking on that honeysuckle, it
doesn't surprise me. Why you
were out there at all this
morning is beyond me but of
course you don't say anything,
do you now?

DICEY
She does, if you listen.

Ab glares at Dicey observing from the threshold.

AB
Now can't you see I'm asking
your sister to speak for
herself?

DICEY
Why don't you ...

AB
... just keep out of this.

Ab kicks the door with her foot, slamming it closed.

AB (CONT'D)
(massaging)
Your cousin up there in
Bridgeport says she thinks
you're retarded. Is it true?

Maybeth stares at the floor, unwilling to meet her gaze.

AB (CONT'D)
I'm asking, Maybeth. I'm
asking you. Is it true?

Maybeth looks up, silent tears rolling down her cheeks.

MAYBETH
I don't think I am. I don't
know just what it means, but if
it's such a bad thing to be --
why do you want to know?

Ab nods, briskly.

AB
You'll have to take it easy for
a couple weeks. You
understand?

Maybeth nods timidly -- Ab grunts.

AB (CONT'D)
Well, last time I saw your
mother she wasn't talking to me
either.

Maybeth only stares -- Ab starts to make a sling from shoulder to wrist, ripping gauze with her teeth.

AB (CONT'D)

Me myself -- I shut up more times than I care to remember. Mostly just afraid I guess. But if you don't speak up when you should, sometimes you never get a chance to make it right.

MAYBETH

Did you love our Momma?

Startled by her question, Ab gazes at the little girl as if Liza could somehow be glimpsed within.

AB

Yes. Yes I did.

MAYBETH

I'm glad.

Ab secures the sling with a safety pin.

AB

That's all right then.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Dicey's fuming by the counters when Ab guides a sling-armed Maybeth back into the room; the boys watch nervously from their chairs.

MAYBETH

It's okay, Dicey. I'm better now.

AB

What are your plans for the day?

DICEY

Clean out the barn.

AB

Not without sunlight. It's dark as the tomb in there.

DICEY
We'll wash windows.

AB
In the rain?

DICEY
It's not raining inside.

Ab stares evenly as Dicey helps Maybeth into her chair.

AB
I could use some help in the
kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN (LATER)

SINGING an up-beat SONG, Dicey washes tomatoes, James cuts them up, Maybeth ladles them into jars and Sammy rips old towels into pieces of cloth; Ab, her back to the children, silently mouths the words while setting jars into the canning pot.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Dicey adds a good dose of ammonia to a bucket filling with hot water in the tub.

INT. STAIRWAY - DAY

Dicey arrives upstairs with her bucket.

DICEY
Sammy, you almost done up here?

She enters Sammy's room.

INT. SAMMY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Dicey discovers an abandoned bucket and rags beneath a half-cleaned window -- she frowns.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Dicey enters to find Ab sitting with a cup of tea while two canning pots rattle on the stove; a huge bowl of cut squashes waits to be canned next.

DICEY
Have you seen Sammy?

AB
He ran through a while back,
more than an hour. Didn't he
say where he was going?

Dicey shakes her head. Grunting her disapproval, Ab checks her pots on the stove.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Dicey enters to find Maybeth playing the piano and James sprawled on the couch reading his book.

DICEY
What are you doing? You're
supposed to be washing windows.

James looks up from his book.

JAMES
We're finished.

DICEY
Well do them again. We've got
to look busy. Where's Sammy?

They shrug. A PUNITIVE VOICE from the kitchen commands her attention.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Dicey enters to find Ab in mid-lecture -- Sammy listens defiantly, his hair plastered to his forehead, his shirt and shorts dripping on the floor.

AB
So you just run off without
telling anyone where you're
going? Your sister was
worried.

SAMMY
You weren't, were you?

Ab shakes her head.

SAMMY (CONT'D)
Then why are you yelling at me
about it?

She stares -- Sammy sticks out his jaw, staring back.

DICEY
Don't be rude, Sammy.

SAMMY
But it's the truth.

Dicey strips off his wet shorts and shirt.

SAMMY (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, Dicey, I got tired
of windows so I bailed out the
boat so the motor won't get
covered with water. Then I
checked the crab pots -- the
water doesn't have any waves.

DICEY
Because there's no wind. Next
time, tell me where you're
going, okay?

SAMMY
Okay.

DICEY
Now go get some dry clothes.

Sammy scurries from the room.

AB
Doesn't he get punished?

Dicey hesitates before answering in a pleasant voice.

DICEY
No. Why should he? He was
trying to help.

AB

You'll ruin him. He's willful
and needs to learn.

DICEY

No. He doesn't need to learn
to give in and give up. That's
what you mean, isn't it? The
way Sammy is -- he's not
perfect, but he's all right.
Stubbornness isn't bad.

AB

He fights.

DICEY

So do I. And I'm glad he knows
how.

With a begrudging grunt, Ab takes her WHISTLING tea kettle
off the stove.

AB

If you didn't know it already,
you can't be working a six-year
old all day long. In the barn,
up in the loft, I think there's
a bike somewhere near his size.

Cup in hand, she walks briskly to her bedroom. Dicey
shakes her head with a smile, unsure what to make of this
volatile grandmother.

INT. BARN - DAY

Maybeth knocks down spider webs with her good arm while
Sammy sweeps the floor; in the UPPER LOFT, Dicey and James
work as a team moving lumber in order to get to a small red
Schwinn bicycle leaning against the wall.

JAMES

Whaddya' think, Dicey -- are we
going to stay?

DICEY

I think so. I think we've
shown her we can be useful.
And not too much trouble.

JAMES

Why do you think Momma left and never came back?

Dacey struggles for an answer.

DICEY

Do you think there's something we don't know? Do you think it's dangerous for us?

James shrugs.

JAMES

Do you like her?

DICEY

You know, I could. I mean, it's like we both know what's going on but neither of us is saying anything. It's fun.

JAMES

You're crazy.

DICEY

Maybe. But she's a good enemy -- you know? So she might make a good friend.

The lumber cleared, Dacey carries the bike to the edge of the loft where she can see Sammy busily sweeping below.

DICEY (CONT'D)

Hey, Sammy -- look what we found.

Sammy drops his broom in delight.

SAMMY

Good-o!

EXT. YARD - DAY

The storm is over. Dacey and Maybeth swing open the barn door -- James emerges running Sammy on the old Schwinn.

JAMES

Keep pumping don't lean keep
straight crouch a little steady
those bars -- that a way. Pump
pump pump.

He launches Sammy into his inaugural flight.

JAMES (CONT'D)

That's it, keep it up. You got
it! Don't lean!

Sammy wobbles ten yards before toppling into a giant mud puddle -- he leaps up to the laughter and applause of his brother and sister. Watching from the KITCHEN WINDOW, Ab laughs, too.

SAMMY

I did it, I did it, did you see
me? Did you see me?

JAMES

Way to go!

Sammy runs the bike himself, building speed, before hopping into the cockpit -- the two-wheeler careens around the corner out of sight. Another CRASH.

SAMMY

(O.S.)
I'm okay!

Dacey and James smile at his determination.

JAMES

I better stay with him.

DICEY

Sorry, James -- you stay with
me until we finish the barn.
(calling)
Don't go too far, Sammy.

No reply.

EXT. FARMER'S LANE - DAY

In late afternoon, Sammy pedals triumphantly down the grassy path and away from the farm.

INT. BARN - DAY

Alone in the sail boat, Dicey hoists the sail on its mast, transported to another place and time.

JAMES
(O.S., calling)
Dicey, Sammy -- time for
supper. Dicey, Sammy.

EXT. YARD - DAY

Dicey latches the barn doors before sprinting across the yard.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Dicey washes her hands at the sink, then joins Ab, James and Maybeth at the table; canning jars cover the counters. Dicey eyes the one empty chair: Sammy's. She and Ab share a look.

AB
Least the majority of us made
it on time. You children saved
the vegetables today and for
that, I give you thanks.

MAYBETH
You're welcome.

AB
Let's eat, folks, before it
gets cold.

Dicey ladles boiled potatoes onto Maybeth's plate while James takes a slice of ham.

JAMES
How come you don't have a
phone?

AB
Took it out years ago.

JAMES
Why would you do that?

AB
You're too young. You wouldn't understand.

James waits, undeterred by Ab's assertion -- she sighs.

AB (CONT'D)
At least I used to understand.
(BEAT) See, my boy Bullet, he was in the army ...

JAMES
What kind of name is Bullet?

AB
(impatiently)
Was a nickname.

JAMES
What was his real name?

AB
Sam. Samuel.

JAMES
(excited)
Oh, like Sammy -- Momma must've named him for her brother. Was he like Sammy is?

AB
Do you want this story or not?

JAMES
Yes.

AB
Okay. Bullet was in the army and I guess somebody somewhere thought it was important he go fight in some foolish war ...

JAMES
Vietnam?

AB

Yeah.

Her face stiffens, eyes clouding.

AB (CONT'D)

They called me up on that telephone to tell me he got killed. I had to do something. What I did was, I went downtown and took the thing and threw it right through the phone company window.

James laughs -- Ab flashes her sudden smile.

AB (CONT'D)

They were surprised, I can tell you that. Didn't help of course -- but it was better than doing nothing.

JAMES

Did you hit anyone?

AB

Nah.

She goes to the refrigerator to refill the pitcher of milk.

AB (CONT'D)

Mosquitoes get pretty bad around this time of year. It's probably a good idea to patch those upstairs screens.

Dacey and James share a knowing glance.

DICEY

James and I can do that tomorrow.

Outside, a CRASH, then RUNNING STEPS: Sammy bursts into the kitchen, out of breath.

SAMMY

I can ride!

He slides with red cheeks and sparkling eyes into his chair.

SAMMY (CONT'D)
What's for supper?

DICEY
Wash your hands.

He bounces to the sink.

AB
And when you've done that, go to your room.

SAMMY
But I'm hungry.

AB
That'll help you remember -- get me? Did you tell your sister where you were going?

He juts his jaw defiantly.

AB (CONT'D)
(to Dicey)
Did he tell you? Did he have your permission?

DICEY
Sort of.

AB
Sort of? How do you 'sort of' give permission to gallivant all day long and then miss supper? Do you say 'okay, Sammy, go sort of run wild and sort of let people worry?' Are you stupid, girl?

Dicey chews her lip.

SAMMY
It's not her fault. Don't yell at Dicey.

AB

I will yell at whom I please.
I have told you to go to your
room.

DICEY

(quietly)

No.

JAMES

(whispered)

Dicey!

DICEY

It's not right, James. It's
not right to send him to bed
hungry. I can't let that
happen. Sit down and eat,
Sammy.

She turns to her grandmother. Ab is stiff and pale, her
lips hard together.

DICEY (CONT'D)

You, you don't understand, not
what it is to be hungry. It
doesn't serve any purpose to
punish Sammy that way.

Ab's fury burns behind a stone face, her hand clenching a
fork.

AB

Whose house is this? Whose
food? Whose table?

DICEY

You're right. It's not our
house, that's what you said
from the beginning. But we're
not your family -- you meant
that, too, didn't you.

Ab seethes in furious silence. Frightened, James and
Maybeth can only stare at Dicey.

DICEY (CONT'D)

Sit down and eat. But you're not to ride the bike again for two days.

SAMMY

Aw, Dicey.

He slips into his chair.

DICEY

I mean it. No matter what. Will you obey?
(he nods)
You have to say when you're going off.

SAMMY

I know. I will. I'm sorry, Dicey.
(to Ab)
I'm sorry to you, too. But it's my fault, not Dicey's.

AB

You're a child.

SAMMY

So is Dicey.

AB

I will not have this talking back!

JAMES

But it's not talking back. It's explaining. We're trying to get at the truth.

Ab looks around the table at four pair of hazel eyes, none as dark as hers, none as angry except Dicey's.

AB

You are in my home. My home, not yours.

Dicey takes a deep, shivering breath.

DICEY

Are you expecting us to stay
then?

Ab looks surprised, as if this time not understanding what it was they were fighting about. Her mouth works, but no sound emerges. Finally ...

AB

No.

The word balloons out, filling all the air in the kitchen. Dicey nods, then stares defeated at her plate. A terrible silence chokes the room.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

A cold wind blows clouds over the face of the moon. The old house sits dark apart from a single light burning in the kitchen.

INT. DICEY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dicey stares out her window into the black night. Downhearted, she leans her forehead against the glass. Below, a yellow light flows onto the lawn.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Ab, at the table with a cup of tea, her hair tousled and wearing an old bathrobe, looks up from her letter-writing: Dicey hovers on the threshold.

AB

I couldn't sleep so I'm writing
that silly cousin of yours.

Dicey stares as if seeing Ab for the first time.

AB (CONT'D)

What're you staring at, girl?

DICEY

You. You're pretty. I never
noticed.

AB
(ignoring comment)
Sit down. Get a glass of milk
first. I've got something I
should say to you.

Dicey opens the fridge and pours some milk.

DICEY
It's okay. I'm not going to
argue about staying.

AB
Wouldn't do you any good. But
I want to explain.

Dicey joins Ab at the table.

AB (CONT'D)
I've never explained before, to
anyone, but I have to now.
Because, in a way, I do want to
keep you here. But I can't.
(Dicey nods)
I'm old. Not very old yet, but
getting older. When my husband
died he left some insurance
money, enough to go on if I
live carefully. What with the
grocery bill this week, I'm
already going to have to die a
month sooner than I planned.

DICEY
That's crazy.

AB
It's a joke, girl. I mean to
explain that I don't have the
money for raising more kids.

DICEY
But with a farm there must be
lots of ways to get money --
James says you could grow
Christmas trees, everybody buys
a Christmas tree.

Ab stops her with a raised hand.

AB

There's more, which if you can't understand now, there's always later. I was married for thirty-eight years and when you marry someone, you make promises. I kept those promises -- love, honor and obey. Even when I didn't want to, I kept them. I always went his way.

DICEY

That's hard to believe.

AB

It is, isn't it? But my husband was a man always sure he was right and you were wrong and I guess I learned early on how to give in and give up. Since he died, I've been different. It took a while, but it's my own life I'm living now -- no lies, no pretending, no standing back quiet when I want to fight.

DICEY

It's okay. I understand.

AB

That's more than your Momma could. She stuck around here a long time just because she felt sorry for me -- did you know that?

DICEY

No. She never talked about you.

AB

Well, I can hardly blame her. Do you know what I said to her, just before she left this house? She was twenty-one then and pregnant with you and her father couldn't stop her. I said, 'We don't want to hear anything from you until we hear that you've been married.' He was right beside me and I knew it was what he would say but I was the one to say it. Do you know what she said? She said, 'I'll never get married.' She wasn't angry, she said it gentle, like Maybeth.

DICEY

Why didn't she want to get married?

AB

Because she had seen what happens.

DICEY

But can't you fight with somebody and still love them?

AB

Back then I didn't know how. I was angry most of the time but I shut my mouth, even when I had things to say. You can choke swallowing back anger and it still sneaks out in little ways and everybody knows but nobody says anything.

Her eyes glaze in recollection.

AB (CONT'D)

I know I had a lot of love to give in those days, to my husband, too. But it got turned around. I let myself get turned around.

She waves her hand to brush away the memory.

AB (CONT'D)

So they left, every one. They couldn't stay here. All of my children, they ran as fast and as far as they could. My Sammy, he died of it, and that was hard. Hard. Then John, and your poor Momma ... I failed them. I let them go. He didn't know why they left, but I did. So, I'm responsible. I won't have that responsibility again, not to fail again.

DICEY

But we'll help you this time.

AB

Help your cousin instead.

DICEY

But she's only taking us because she thinks it's her duty or job or something.

Ab looks to Dicey with weary eyes.

AB

Well, maybe this letter will set her straight on a few things, make it a little easier for you.

Overwhelmed, Dicey watches Ab fold the letter into an envelope and seal it.

AB (CONT'D)

Now you best get to bed. You can take this letter with you in the morning.

DICEY

But we haven't finished the barn yet and ...

Ab rises from the table.

AB
The bus rolls eight o'clock
sharp so we leave here by
seven-thirty.

She starts down the hall.

AB (CONT'D)
Turn out the light when you're
done.

Unwilling to surrender, Dicey follows fiercely on her heels.

DICEY
Well you should, you know --
you should let us stay!

AB
Don't you listen, girl -- I
said 'no' and there's an end on
it!

She escapes into her room, shutting the door behind. Dicey bangs it with her fist then dashes up the stairs.

INT. DICEY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dicey slips into bed, pulling the covers over her head. A whimper escapes, then a sob. In the dark, under the covers, she cries and cries.

INT. STAIRWAY - DAY

The Tillermans solemnly descend the stair, Dicey carrying their brown bag suitcase.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The children enter to find Ab sipping coffee. Dicey and Ab share a cool look, then, with nary a glance at the fully-set breakfast table, Dicey marches her troops onto the porch. Ab follows to the screen: the children sit on the top step, facing the bay.

AB
How many eggs does everybody
want?

DICEY
We're not hungry.

AB
Suit yourselves.

She grabs a worn purse.

EXT. FRONT YARD - DAY

As Ab opens the door, Dicey grips Maybeth's hand and strides toward the marshland, closely followed by her brothers. Sammy sneaks a peek at Ab trailing behind.

EXT. THE BAY/SKIFF - DAY

Cutting a deep wake across the bay, the skiff carries the grim-faced Tillermans: James and Sammy at the prow, then Dicey and Maybeth, an empty seat, then finally Ab at the Evinrude tiller.

EXT. CRISFIELD DOCKS/SKIFF - DAY

Ab maneuvers against the wharf and ties onto the cleats. The Tillermans disembark beside an old gas pump, then follow Ab along the wharf toward the back door of Millie's grocery store.

INT. MILLIE'S GROCERY - DAY

Posted behind the meat counter, Millie curiously watches the Tillermans enter from the back door and parade through the store.

MILLIE
Good morning, Ab, now what ...

Ab juts her chin with fired eyes, silencing the butcher in mid-stream. They exit out the front door.

EXT. MILLIE'S/BUS STOP - DAY

The Tillermans arrive beside a worn wooden bench, a BUS STOP SIGN posted above. Ab gestures to the bench -- the

children sit in a tight row: James, Maybeth, Sammy, Dicey ... then Ab. SUMMER SOUNDS float through the gentle breeze; Sammy taps his foot against the bench leg.

Suddenly the DISTANT DRONE of a BUS commands their attention. The SOUND LOOMS through the empty streets until the bus itself swings ominously onto the square, then wheezes to a stop in front of the bench.

The door opens: a gray-haired DRIVER eases down the steps. Lighting a cigarette, he glances curiously at the Tillermans, frozen like statuary on the bench, then enters the store.

Each Tillerman stares at the bus in absolute terror. Ab's eyes are locked on the open door, as if staring into a dark abyss. Dicey reaches to slip her hand delicately into Ab's. Ab's fingers curl, almost involuntarily, around the girl's hand and squeeze tightly.

The driver returns outside with a soda, checks his watch, then flips his cigarette and climbs back aboard. He fires the diesel engine, glances a last time at the sculpture -- FIVE FIGURES ON A BENCH -- then closes the door and swings his bus into its departing arc.

AB

Hmnp.

Still gripping Dicey's hand, Ab stands abruptly and strides into the store. Bewildered, the others follow.

INT. MILLIE'S GROCERY - DAY

Millie stares unabashedly at Ab leading the parade back through her store. Ab pauses at the counter.

AB

Millie -- I want you to meet my grandchildren. This is Dicey and Sammy and here's Maybeth and James.

Millie nods with a curious smile.

MILLIE

My pleasure, I'm sure.

The children stand gaping at their grandmother.

AB

Okay, Tillermans, let's keep it going, I can't be growing old in a damn grocery store.

The children hustle out the back door. Ab, though, hesitates.

AB (CONT'D)

Millie, you ever buy a Christmas tree?

MILLIE

Every year. Why?

Ab grunts softly as she makes her way to the rear door.

EXT. CRISFIELD DOCKS - DAY

The children are waiting when Ab emerges from the store.

SAMMY

If you're our grandmother -- I mean, if you say you are -- I mean, we know you are but you never said so -- now that you say so, what do I call you?

AB

You call me Gram.

SAMMY

Gram.

He runs to the edge of the dock and wheels around.

SAMMY (CONT'D)

Hey, Gram!

He runs back to dance around his grandmother.

SAMMY (CONT'D)

Hey, Gram?

AB

Yes, Sammy.

She leads the children along the wharf, Maybeth taking her hand.

SAMMY

You like us, don't you? You do, no matter what you say. I know.

AB

Never said I didn't.

Barely containing their joy, the children scramble onto the skiff, Dicey and James undoing the cleats.

DICEY

Gram?

Ab looks down from the dock.

DICEY (CONT'D)

The boat, the sailboat in the barn. Can I fix it up and sail it? Can I have it?

AB

Do you know how to sail?

DICEY

No. But I could learn. Could you teach me?

AB

Yes.

DICEY

Yes, what?

AB

Yes to both -- and no more questions, not 'til I get my shoes off.

James gives Ab his hand as she hops aboard to take her place at the tiller. Sammy splashes jubilantly from the prow as Ab yanks the starter cord: the Evinrude fires to life. She smiles at Dicey.

AB (CONT'D)
Ready to go home?

DICEY
Ready.

Twisting the throttle, Ab accelerates into the bay. She draws the Bridgeport letter from her purse, rips it into little pieces and tosses them to the skies. She watches the confetti flutter into the shimmering wake, then turns back to see four radiant faces all watching her eagerly -- she laughs. Then the Tillermans laugh together, Ab and her grandchildren. In each one's face, we see everything that came before and everything that's yet to come ... all the way home.

FADE OUT.