

DICEY'S SONG

Based on the Newbery award-winning novel by
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Teleplay by
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INT. BARN - NIGHT

In a patch of moonlight in a cavernous barn, DICEY TILLERMAN, 13, fierce hazel eyes, short cropped hair and an indefatigable spirit, preps an old 12-foot wooden sailboat. She sets the ropes, hoists the sail, mans the tiller.

EXT. BARN - DAY

The doors of the barn burst open and the boat sails into the daylight atop two saw-horse cradles on wheels -- Dicey steers the rig, aided by her brother JAMES, 11, slight, smart, contemplative; her sister MAYBETH, 9, delicate and shy; her brother SAMMY, 7, a juggernaut of pugnacious energy; and their bemused grandmother AB TILLERMAN, 62, a no-nonsense woman with helter-skelter grey hair and barefoot, as always. They laugh, scream and struggle along the quarter mile stretch of marsh toward the glimmering bay.

EXT. CHESAPEAKE BAY - DAY

Dicey and siblings launch the boat for its inaugural voyage. It quickly fills with water and sinks to the sandy bottom. They stare in somber silence until Sammy breaks the spell.

SAMMY

You can't sail in that.

AB

I should have remembered. I knew, if only I remembered.

Shrugging off disappointment, Dicey wades into the water and begins to bail the boat.

DICEY

James, find something to bail with. We'll have to slide the cradle back into the water. It'll take all four of us.

AB

You'd do better to let it sit out here a day or so. Let the wood soak up water, to swell up again. I knew that once but I forgot. I'm sorry, girl.

The children watch their grandmother board her 16-foot skiff tied to a rickety dock.

AB (cont'd)
I'm going for groceries -- I'll be
back in an hour.

She yanks the coil of the outboard motor, firing the engine,
then navigates into the bay.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAWN

Lights come on inside an old two-story farmhouse set back
from the road in a grove of tall pines.

INT. MAYBETH'S BEDROOM - DAY

Already dressed, Dicey slips inside to sit on the edge of
Maybeth's bed. She gently nudges her sister.

DICEY
Wake up, sleepyhead.

Maybeth turns to Dicey, smiles dreamily.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALL - DAY

Dicey ushers a groggy Sammy down the hall to the bathroom.

DICEY
And don't forget to brush your
teeth.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ab scoops hot oatmeal into bowls and Dicey makes peanut
butter and jelly sandwiches as her brothers and sister, all
showered and combed, parade into the kitchen.

DICEY
Go get your oatmeal.

Sammy and Maybeth go to their grandmother, but James hovers
beside Dicey's lunch preparation.

JAMES
I want three.

DICEY
You get two.

EXT. TILLERMAN MAILBOX - DAY

Waiting by the mailbox at the end of an overgrown dirt
driveway, Ab and the children, all dressed in well-worn

clothes, watch a yellow school bus pull to a stop. Dicey points to the number '14' posted in the window.

DICEY

Don't forget to find the right bus
after school, number 14. Will you
remember -- Maybeth? Sammy?

Nodding, Sammy jumps aboard followed by a tentative James and Maybeth. As the bus drives off, Dicey watches with a mother's worry.

AB

You took care of those kids all
summer long. You've done a good
job, but it's time to take a rest --
you're not the only one responsible
now.

Dicey shrugs, relieved to finally have help but reluctant to let go.

AB (cont'd)

I can hear what you're thinking
girl.

DICEY

(a slow smile)
Maybe you can.

She mounts her bike and pedals away -- Ab watches her go, a mother's worry etched on her face.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Dicey bicycles through the Maryland countryside. A beat-up station wagon approaches from the opposite direction. She stops to watch it go past.

EXT. MASSACHUSETTS STATE HIGHWAY - DAY (**FLASHBACK**)

CAMERA SWOOPS inside a similar station wagon to reveal Dicey with a map spread across her lap, her frightened siblings in back and their mother LIZA TILLERMAN, 35, disheveled blond hair, gripping the wheel with white-knuckled intensity.

BACK TO:

DICEY

She watches until the station wagon disappears around the curve.

INT. CRISFIELD HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Dressed in old cutoffs, worn T-shirt and dirty sneakers, Dicey walks the school corridor surrounded by the charged energy of the first day of school.

INT. VICE-PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE - DAY

Dicey sits in front of MR. TURAN, 40s, the vice-principal dressed in casual clothes -- he peruses her transcript.

MR. TURAN

Hmmnn. You're from Massachusetts, huh? Provincetown.

He gives her a look -- she nods.

MR. TURAN (cont'd)

I used to vacation up there, all around the Cape -- lovely area. When did you move to Crisfield?

DICEY

About three weeks ago.

MR. TURAN

What brought your family down here? Dad's job?

DICEY

No. I'm staying with my grandmother, for a while.

(off his look)

My mom has been sort of busy, so I'm down here with my brothers and sister.

MR. TURAN

Younger?

(she nods)

You getting along okay with your grandmother?

(she nods)

You know, Dicey, if you'd like I can set up a meeting with our guidance counselor.

When she doesn't react, he returns to her transcript.

MR. TURAN (cont'd)

I see you were involved in numerous fights at your previous school. Let me advise you right now -- if
(more)

MR. TURAN (cont'd)
 you get into it here, you'll be
 suspended.

(Dicey nods)
 You seem like a nice enough kid --
 why all the fights?

She shrugs. He picks up her transcript, stands up.

MR. TURAN (cont'd)
 All right, chatterbox -- c'mon,
 I'll walk you out.

He escorts her through the MAIN OFFICE.

MR. TURAN (cont'd)
 Remember what we talked about.
 This is a fresh start -- make the
 right choices.

When Dicey leaves, he gives her transcript to the SCHOOL
 SECRETARY with a roll of his eyes.

MR. TURAN (cont'd)
 Her grandmother is Abigail
 Tillerman.

SECRETARY
 That poor thing -- I can't believe
 they'd let a child live under the
 same roof with that crazy old coot.

MR. TURAN
 That's not the worst of it --
 there's four of them.

She shakes her head with dismay.

INT. ENGLISH CLASS - DAY

Dicey walks into a class already in session. The room goes
 quiet as she hands a slip of paper to MR. CHAPPELLE, 28,
 imperious, wearing coat and tie. While he scans the paper,
 someone in back calls out "nice outfit" and the kids erupt
 with LAUGHTER.

MR. CHAPPELLE
 All right, people, settle down. We
 have a new transfer -- Dicey ... is
 that your real name?
 (Dicey nods)
 Hmmph. Dicey Tillerman.

Another voice from the back, "that explains everything" --
 more LAUGHTER.

MR. CHAPPELLE (cont'd)
That's enough. In case you hadn't
noticed -- summer is over.

He gives Dicey a textbook.

MR. CHAPPELLE (cont'd)
Pick out a seat.

Ignoring the stares, Dicey moves to the back of the room,
isolating herself at a desk by the window.

MR. CHAPPELLE (cont'd)
Open your books to page one.
(GROANING)
C'mon, where else -- the beginning.

WILHEMINA (Mina) SMITHS, 14, a vivacious black girl with a
lively face, turns in her front row seat to offer the new
girl a smile -- Dicey turns away to look out the window.

INT. HOME ECONOMICS CLASS - DAY

Miss Eversleigh, 50s, well-appointed, strolls the aisles of
her classroom.

MISS EVERSLEIGH
In this class we'll learn about all
aspects of caring for a family --
budgeting meals, sewing, cooking,
raising children -- social skills
that will serve you for the rest of
your lives ...

Seated again at the back, Dicey stares out the window.

EXT. MALL PARKING LOT - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Liza Tillerman puts her sad moon face in the window of the
station wagon.

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

TILLERMANS
Yes, Momma.

LIZA
That's all right then.

The kids watch her go, her stride hindered by a broken sandal, elbows jutting through holes in her oversized sweater, her jeans faded and baggy.

BACK TO:

DICEY

She's shaken from her memories by an irritated Eversleigh.

MISS EVERSLEIGH

Is there something more involving
out the window than the syllabus
for this class, miss? Or do you
think you already know everything?

Dacey stares mutely.

EXT. SCHOOL BIKE RACK - DAY

After school, Dacey hurries to the bike rack at the back of the school. There's a boy -- JEFF, 15, thin with choppy black hair and soulful eyes -- seated on a low wall quietly singing and playing an ORIGINAL SONG on his guitar. She stops to listen: he's really good. At song's end, he looks at Dacey with questioning eyes.

DICEY

I never heard that song.

He strums a few chords.

JEFF

Because I wrote it. Have a sit.

Dacey shakes her head and turns away to unlock her bike. As she rides away, Jeff begins another tune.

EXT. CRISFIELD - DAY

Dacey bicycles the streets of Crisfield, a once prosperous fishing town on the Chesapeake Bay now fallen on hard times but still picturesque. She arrives at a weathered grocery store facing the harbor.

INT. MILLIE'S GROCERY - DAY

Dacey enters the cramped store taking note of its dusty, unkempt shelves and dirty floor. She approaches a counter where MILLIE TYDINGS, 62, the heavy-set owner wearing a stained apron, cuts meat with a large cleaver.

MILLIE

What can I do for you today? How's your grandmother?

DICEY

She's fine. I came to ask if you might give me a job.

MILLIE

A job? Why? Why should I do that? I don't make enough to keep myself in comfortable shoes.

DICEY

But if I kept the place cleaner more people would want to come and shop. If I washed the windows and the floors and dusted off the shelves ...

MILLIE

Business isn't good.

DICEY

But it should be. I mean, you have the only grocery store right on the water. If it looked nicer people would want to come to you.

Skeptical, Millie considers Dicey's proposition.

DICEY (cont'd)

You see, my theory is that instead of costing you money, I'd be making you money.

MILLIE

Do you think so?

Dicey nods hopefully.

EXT. MARSH - DAY

Ab and James, burdened with grocery bags, stride along the marsh path. They can hear VOICES SINGING as they round the bend to find Dicey, Maybeth and Sammy painting the old barn a classic red. Dicey is sweaty and paint-streaked. Sammy, in his underwear with a red 'X' painted across his chest, runs over to take one of gram's bags in his grubby arms.

AB

You are a mess.

Sammy grins with satisfaction as he carries the bag across the yard to the house. Ab appreciates the newly painted barn as Dicey approaches wiping her sweaty brow with her T-shirt.

AB (cont'd)

I understand you were gallivanting around town looking for some job.

Dicey stares defiantly -- Ab stares right back.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The Tillermans eat spaghetti: Sammy, his face covered with sauce, shovels noodles into his mouth while the others practice winding pasta onto their forks with uneven results.

AB

You're only thirteen years old -- aren't you supposed to have some kind of work permit?

DICEY

She didn't say anything.

AB

What about school? You won't have time to study.

DICEY

School's easy. I won't have any trouble at school.

JAMES

Me neither.

AB

Oh really? I thought they put you in some special class with a bunch of smart kids.

JAMES

(matter-of-factly)

They're smart, but not like me. I thought they might be, but they aren't. They're okay.

Dicey looks at each of her siblings.

DICEY

I thought we should have allowances. Five dollars a week.

SAMMY

Even me?

DICEY

Even you.

SAMMY

Good-o! Even Gram?

Dicey can't read her grandmother's expressionless face.

DICEY

Gram, too, but Gram gets more.
It's seventy-five dollars a week,
all together.

SAMMY

(to Ab)

You could get some shoes. You need
to wear shoes when it gets cold.

Ab can't contain her amusement.

SAMMY (cont'd)

Well, you do.

AB

How do you think I lived so long?
Not by going barefoot in cold
weather.

SAMMY

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

DICEY

So it's all right?

AB

If you've made arrangements, it'll
have to be. But I thought, if you
were a family, you talked over your
plans first.

JAMES

And got permission.

AB

Not permission -- just to check in.

Dicey's jaw tightens but she doesn't say anything.

MAYBETH

I'm proud of Dicey.

AB

Oh, so am I. I think Dicey knows that. You get things done, girl, I've got to give you that.

SAMMY

You don't act like it.

AB

Appearances can be deceiving.

SAMMY

Why?

AB

Because you can't judge a book by its cover.

SAMMY

Why not?

Grunting, Ab starts to clear the dishes.

AB

I have just been struck deaf -- I can not hear another word you're going to say.

The Tillermans share a giggle.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dicey enters and looks around at her siblings, more content and secure than they've been in a very long time: Maybeth's tinkering on the piano while James reads a volume of the World Book Encyclopedia and Sammy plays checkers with his grandmother. Maybeth begins to pick out the melody for "THE WATER IS WIDE" -- Ab looks up, her conscience pricked by the familiar melody.

AB

Where'd you learn that song?

DICEY

It's our Momma's song.

SAMMY

King me!

AB

You're still a move short -- you
got to get to the end of the board.

SAMMY

Momma used to.

AB

If you're going to play with me,
you're going to play by the rules.
You're big enough, aren't you? To
play by the real rules.

Sammy doesn't want to say 'yes' but he doesn't want to say
'no.'

AB (cont'd)

My move then.

Restless, Dicey slips away.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Working by kerosene lantern, Dicey scrapes the chipped paint
off her cherished sailboat, now perched again atop its
sawhorse cradles. While scraping, she softly sings "THE
WATER IS WIDE."

EXT. FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

With just one headlight, the station wagon motors slowly up
the driveway. DICEY'S SONG FADES as Liza Tillerman gets out,
gazes at the familiar surroundings of her childhood home.

LIZA

(calling out)

Dicey, it's Momma -- I'm home.
Where are you, Dicey? Dicey?!

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Hearing her mother's voice, Dicey throws down her scraper and
charges out of the barn, ecstatic.

INT. YARD - NIGHT

Dicey races toward her mother waiting with open arms. She's
about to reach her when ...

INT. DICEY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dicey **bolts awake from the dream**. She goes to the window and looks out at the empty moonlit yard. She needs to cry, but can't.

INT. ATTIC - DAY

Sammy and Maybeth hover expectantly as James pulls down the ladder stairs to the attic. On tip-toe, they creep up into the shadowed world of boxes, trunks, old toys and a cradle.

MAYBETH

It's like a ghost house.

SAMMY

Boo!

Sammy and Maybeth giggle.

JAMES

Quiet! C'mon.

James breaks through a spider's web to kneel in front of an old steamer trunk. He opens it to reveal a neatly folded Marine uniform and American flag.

JAMES (cont'd)

(whispering)

Wow. This must have belonged to
Bullet.

He looks under the uniform to discover several photo albums. Spellbound, they begin to page through the old photographs. Sammy points to a 7-year-old girl with curly blonde hair seated on the porch with a young Ab.

SAMMY

Who's that?

MAYBETH

That's Momma.

AB (O.S.)

What do you think you're doing?!

Startled, they turn to see their grandmother angrily approaching.

AB (cont'd)

Who gave you permission to come up
here?!

JAMES
Well, we just ...

AB
You think you can just do whatever
you damn please?

James starts to put the albums back into the trunk.

AB (cont'd)
Out! Right now!

Maybeth starts to cry.

AB (cont'd)
Go to your rooms. You are not to
leave them until I say so.

Chastened, they scurry past their grandmother and down the
steps. Last to leave, James turns back.

JAMES
I'm sorry, Gram. I should have
thought. I promise we won't come
up here again.

Ab dismisses him with a wave of her hand, her gaze riveted on
the photo albums and uniform, haunted by the painful memories
they evoke.

EXT. CHESAPEAKE BAY/TILLERMAN DOCK - NIGHT

Accompanied by the sound of croaking frogs from the marsh,
Dicey and James lie on the dock gazing above at the myriad of
twinkling stars; Ab's 16-foot skiff is tied alongside.

JAMES
Did you know some stars are already
dead -- but because it takes light
so long to get here, like millions
of years, we can still see them ...
even though they're not even there
anymore.

DICEY
What's wrong, James?

JAMES
All we did was go up in the attic.
(she shrugs)
Do you ever wonder why she doesn't
talk about anything from the past?

DICEY

Nope.

JAMES

I do. Why did all her children leave? Is there something we don't know? Do you think it's dangerous for us here?

DICEY

No. She's hard sometimes, but she's not bad.

JAMES

Then how come Momma never talked about her?

Dicey stares at her brother -- she doesn't know.

DICEY

I wouldn't worry about it, James.

JAMES

Why not?

DICEY

Because it won't do any good.

Sighing, James lies back to contemplate the stars.

INT. BARN - DAY

Dicey pulls the barn doors open wide and the morning sun illumines her sail boat. She goes to work scraping paint from the worn hull. Sammy, stripped to his underwear and covered in garden mud, wanders in carrying a shovel. He watches over Dicey's shoulder.

SAMMY

I could help.

Dicey grunts and shakes her head.

SAMMY (cont'd)

Why not?

DICEY

There's no tool.

SAMMY

You're mean.

DICEY

Look, Sammy, this is something I just want to do by myself -- can you understand that?

SAMMY

I don't care.

He accidentally on purpose bumps Dicey -- her scraper blade digs into the wood.

DICEY

Sammy!

SAMMY

So what!

Mad, he wanders off to another part of the barn. Dicey returns to her scraping until HAMMERING SOUNDS stop her.

DICEY

Sammy -- what are you doing?!

SAMMY (O.S.)

Hey, Dicey -- we could raise chickens!

He runs up with hay stuck to the mud on his half-naked body.

SAMMY (cont'd)

I just found the perfect place for chickens.

Suddenly James bursts into the barn.

JAMES

She's here -- and she brought the police!

DICEY

Who's here?

JAMES

Cousin Eunice!

In disbelief, they run to the barn door and peek out.

FARMYARD - TILLERMANS' POV

A sheriff's car is parked by the house: EUNICE LOGAN, 45, a bird-like woman with glasses, FATHER JOSEPH, 50s, Eunice's

priest, and RUSTY ANDERSON, late 30s, Crisfield's sheriff, approach the house.

BACK TO:

THE TILLERMANS

They watch frozen in place.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ab and Maybeth are busy canning: chopped fruits and vegetables cover the counters and glass jars boil in huge pots rattling on the stove, filling the kitchen with steam. There's a knock at the door: the sheriff waits silhouetted behind the screen.

RUSTY

Hello, Mrs. Tillerman -- sorry to barge in on you but ...

AB

(sarcastic)
Am I under arrest?

RUSTY

(chuckling)
Not yet, anyway. How are you?

AB

That all depends.

She opens the door, stares at Eunice.

AB (cont'd)

You must be Eunice -- you're a spitting image of your mother.

EUNICE

Hello, Aunt Abigail. I'm sorry, I would have called first but unfortunately you don't have a phone.

She sees Maybeth hovering shyly behind the table, hurries toward her.

EUNICE (cont'd)

Thank the good Lord.

She envelops the little girl in her embrace.

EUNICE (cont'd)

My sweet Maybeth.

She wipes the moist hair back from her face.

EUNICE (cont'd)
For heaven's sake, you poor thing --
you're all hot and sweaty.

Dacey apprehensively enters, followed by James and Sammy.

EUNICE (cont'd)
Oh, children -- thanks be to God,
you're all safe. Father Joseph and
I have been out of our minds with
worry.

She approaches the mud-covered Sammy.

EUNICE (cont'd)
Samuel, where are your clothes --
you can't be running around in
public like this.

SAMMY
I like it.

EUNICE
Oh, for heavens sake -- you're not
a little bush baby, are you?

Sammy frowns as Fr. Joseph shakes hands with James.

FR. JOSEPH
James -- the brothers at Holy Cross
have all been asking for you.

JAMES
Really?

EUNICE
Well, of course.

She turns to Dacey with an exasperated sigh.

EUNICE (cont'd)
Dacey -- why on earth? Why would
you run away in the middle of the
night? Don't you know that any
number of horrible things could
have happened to you children?

DICEY
I wanted to explain, but -- it, it
just wasn't right for us.

AB
I'm going to have a cup of tea.
Anyone else?

EUNICE
Thank you, please.

Ab takes the kettle from the stove and begins to fill it at the sink.

AB
All right, folks -- would someone care to tell me what this is all about?

Eunice looks to Father Joseph before plunging ahead.

EUNICE
I've come for the children. I've come to take them back home, with me.

The children, aghast, look to Ab for her response.

AB
Over my dead body.

A helpless smile flutters across Eunice's lips -- she looks to the sheriff. Rusty pulls a letter from his pocket.

RUSTY
I'm sorry, Mrs. Tillerman, but apparently Ms. Logan notified her local authorities that these kids were runaways and she was able to get the ...

Ab smashes the kettle on the stove.

AB
I don't care if she's got Napoleon's army -- I'm telling you right now these kids are going nowhere.

RUSTY
Now don't go off half-cocked here.

AB
Rusty, you played in this house with my boys since the first grade -
- you weren't a bad kid then, so don't get started now.

When Rusty hesitates, unsure what to do next, Father Joseph takes the lead.

FR. JOSEPH

Mrs. Tillerman, maybe you're not aware but Eunice accomplished a world of good for these children in a very short time, and right now it would be best for all concerned if you would just let things proceed.

(to Dicey)

Dicey -- please get your things, let's go.

He puts an arm around Sammy's shoulder.

FR. JOSEPH (cont'd)

You, too, Sammy.

SAMMY

I won't go!

He erupts with a flurry of kicks and punches.

FR. JOSEPH

Owww!

When the sheriff grabs Sammy, Dicey leaps on his back like a wildcat -- Eunice clutches Maybeth and makes for the door. Suddenly a thrown jar of tomatoes explodes against the wall which brings the melee to a shocked standstill.

EUNICE

(frightened whisper)

Dear God.

AB

Let go of that child.

Maybeth runs into Dicey's arms.

AB (cont'd)

All of you, get out of my house -- or the next round will be from my shotgun.

Rusty makes a quick assessment.

RUSTY

All right, okay, calm down. C'mon, folks -- we better go.

EUNICE

Well, I never -- children, I'm just
sorry you had to see your
grandmother's disgraceful behavior.

(to Ab)

You're even worse than mother said
you were.

She storms out, followed by an unnerved priest and sheriff.
Rusty hovers at the door.

RUSTY

You screwed up, Ab. It didn't have
to be like this.

Ab stares grimly. When he leaves, Sammy presses his face
against the screen.

SAMMY

And don't come back!

EXT. BACK PORCH - TWILIGHT

A gloom surrounds Ab and the kids as they sit together on the
back porch shucking the last of the summer's corn.

AB

I don't know why you went to your
cousin's house to begin with.

DICEY

Because that's the only address we
had. Momma was trying to get us
there before she ...

There's an uncomfortable silence.

JAMES

Before she disappeared. Do you
think they can make us go back?

AB

I don't know, but I like to be
prepared for the worst -- it saves
trouble. With all this going on,
maybe we better consider adoption.

SAMMY

But what about Momma?

DICEY

We don't know where she is.

MAYBETH
Is Momma gone for always?

DICEY
I don't know. She might be.

SAMMY
Don't say that, don't you ever!

Dicey puts her arm around Sammy, draws him close.

JAMES
But if you adopted us and Momma did
come back ...

Ab scans their subdued faces.

AB
Your mother's always your mother --
that never changes.

DICEY
If you wanted to adopt us, I'd like
that.

MAYBETH
And me.

The boys nod in agreement.

JAMES
It would be safer for us. We'd
have legal status and rights. But
what about you?

AB
Might be safer for me, too.

She stands, grabs the bag of shucked corn.

AB (cont'd)
That's all right then.

SAMMY
Gram -- can I see your shotgun?

AB
No, you can not.

SAMMY
Why not?

AB

Because I don't have one.

Sammy watches wide-eyed as Ab returns inside, then he turns to Dicey with a big grin, knowing he's in on the secret.

INT. ENGLISH CLASS - DAY

Mr. Chappelle prints a word on the chalk board: 'conflict.'

MR. CHAPPELLE

If we define conflict as requiring two opposing forces, what might we look for? How might conflict appear in a story?

Hands shoot up around the classroom.

TOWN KID

Conflict between two men.

Chappelle writes 'two men' on the blackboard. As the simplistic answers continue, "man and woman," "two women," "boy and girl" -- Chappelle adding them to his list -- Dicey swallows a yawn and concentrates on her drawing of a sailboat. Mina, the gregarious black girl at the front, raises her arm.

MR. CHAPPELLE

Yes, Wilhemina?

MINA

What about conflict between an individual and society?

Dicey's head swivels up, interested in Mina's idea.

MR. CHAPPELLE

What do you mean by that?

MINA

Well, a lot of the time, conflicts are between one person and the people he lives with. If the society thinks one way and the person the other.

MR. CHAPPELLE

Can you give us any examples?

MINA

Jesus, for one. Joan of Arc, and what about Martin Luther King?

As Chappelle chalks her ideas on the board, Dicey drifts into her own conflict-filled memories from the past summer -- we see a SERIES OF FLASHBACKS:

In a MALL PARKING LOT, Sammy locks himself inside the station wagon -- Dicey bangs on the window.

SAMMY

I won't go! I'm gonna wait here
for Momma!

DICEY

Momma's not coming back. Now open
this door!

CUT TO:

Dicey and James walk a two-lane COUNTRY ROAD with an exhausted Maybeth and Sammy straggling behind.

JAMES

We're just kids, Dicey -- we can't
do this anymore!

DICEY

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

CUT TO:

Outside a CONVENIENCE STORE, James guzzles from a quart of milk, then passes it to a famished Sammy -- he chugs it voraciously while Maybeth waits her turn.

DICEY (cont'd)

Not all of it, Sammy!

CUT TO:

The drenched Tillermans hunker down in an ALLEY during a thunderstorm.

JAMES

Anything would be better than this,
even a foster home.

DICEY

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

CUT TO:

In a meticulous LIVING ROOM, the bedraggled children are surrounded by three adults: cousin Eunice, Father Joseph, and a POLICE DETECTIVE.

DETECTIVE

Do you remember what your mother was wearing?

DICEY'S REVERIE is broken as Chappelle suddenly looms over her desk.

MR. CHAPPELLE

Dicey -- do you have something to add to this discussion?

She looks up with a bewildered expression, as if waking from a dream. He sees her sailboat drawing, grabs it off the desk.

MR. CHAPPELLE (cont'd)

Maybe you'd like to suggest the conflict between a student and her teacher.

The CLASS LAUGHS. Irritated, Dicey chews her lip as she watches Chappelle return up the aisle.

DICEY

Between someone and himself.

He pivots, looks back.

MR. CHAPPELLE

Excuse me?

DICEY

Sometimes you want one thing and the opposite at the same time. Or you say one thing when you really mean the opposite. Or there's something you want to do and something you have to do.

Chappelle drops her drawing into the waste basket, then goes to the blackboard and writes 'person and himself.' From across the room, Mina offers Dicey an impressed look.

EXT. SCHOOL BIKE RACK - DAY

Dicey hustles out of school to the bike rack but slows to a stop when she hears Jeff playing his guitar. He looks up to see she's listening, smiles. Dicey smiles back.

EXT. CRISFIELD - DAY

WE HEAR JEFF'S SONG as Dicey bicycles through town.

INT. MILLIE'S STORE - DAY

The SONG CONTINUES with Dicey washing the shelves of the little grocery store -- things are already a lot cleaner -- while Millie sits at the checkout counter chatting away, happy for the company.

EXT. FARMYARD - DAY

JEFF'S SONG FADES as Dicey bikes up the driveway past a departing sheriff's car. Alarmed, she finds James, Maybeth and Sammy hovering by the old mulberry tree in front of the house.

DICEY

James, what's going on?

JAMES

I don't know. Gram sent us outside when the sheriff showed up.

She dumps her bike and hurries inside.

JAMES (cont'd)

I wouldn't go in there -- she's in a really bad mood.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Dicey finds Ab banging around the kitchen. She goes to the fridge, pours herself a glass of milk.

DICEY

I saw the sheriff drive off.

Ab grunts as she measures flour into a mixing bowl.

DICEY (cont'd)

Is everything all right?

AB

Not particularly.

DICEY

What did he want?

Ab uses a whisk to beat her mixture into submission.

AB
That's my business.

DICEY
Did cousin Eunice ...

Ab pivots with fierce hazel eyes.

AB
Don't you listen, girl?

Dicey stares right back.

DICEY
It's our business, too.

Ab throws the whisk into the sink and strides outside --
Dicey follows.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY

Ab beckons from the porch to the intimidated children.

AB
I have something to say -- come on,
that means everybody.

The Tillermans approach apprehensively as Ab draws a paper
from the pocket of her dress and sits on the top step. They
hold their collective breath.

AB (cont'd)
Your cousin is suing me or some
such stupid thing for custody of
you kids.

A stunned silence.

DICEY
But can she do that?

AB
She's done it.

DICEY
But we don't want that, it's not
fair.

AB
Don't make the mistake of thinking
that life isn't a hard business.

DICEY

I know that.

AB

I know you do -- you know it about as well as anybody your age could know it.

Dicey sits next to her grandmother with a weary sigh.

JAMES

It doesn't make sense -- when we were there, she didn't even want us. Dicey and Maybeth were supposed to stay with her but she found some other family to take me and Sammy.

SAMMY

She thought I was going to mess up her house.

Ab shows a trace of a smile.

DICEY

(close to tears)

All she did was complain -- she wanted Sammy to be like James, only James wasn't what she thought, she just liked him because people praised her about how smart he was. And Maybeth -- she wanted her to be a dress-up doll to take places, and ...

AB

Girl, you can talk till you're blue in the face but somebody else will make the decision -- not us, and we'll have to live by it, like it or not.

SAMMY

I won't go and they can't make me!

Ab shakes her head at Sammy's ferocious stubbornness.

JAMES

So what are we going to do?

Heartbroken, the Tillermans look to their grandmother -- she doesn't know.