

Solstice

Patricia sits with her friend Maggie on the kerb, keeping half an eye on her brother Jack and his friends as they play football on the road. One side of the row of terraced houses is now golden and the other side is in violet shade as the sun, which was fierce earlier, dips towards the placid waters of the docks at the bottom of the hill. Earlier today Patricia and Maggie had peeled off their heavy brown shoes with relief and danced barefoot on the pavement - seeing who could stand the scalding heat the longest. The heat is mellower now and they loll about, sedated by the early evening sun. Patricia finds it hard to keep her eyes open and she closes them and leans back, her face tilted towards the sun, spreading her fingers out onto the hot tarmac behind her. Maggie is silent, concentrating on her game of cat's cradle, further along the street the Mackenzie sisters' skipping rope thumps to a regular beat, along with the rhyme they chant and Jimmy Smith is at piano practice as usual; the tune he is murdering ringing out into the street.

Patricia hears a neighbour call out a greeting and her father's voice in return. She turns and watches him walk slowly along the street. He has had a day's work today and is carrying some bags of food, his shoulders stooping slightly. Seeing his daughter sitting on the kerb he straightens and smiles then shouts hello to Jack and his friends, adding some tips for the boy with the ball. He pauses at the front door and removes his work boots before stepping inside into the dark hallway.

The sound of an engine approaches, mingling with the sounds from the piano, and the children watch as a car turns into the street and rolls slowly along the road. It is green and shiny and its metal radiator and winged silver badge catches the sun

and dazzles the children. Patricia shields her eyes and examines the vehicle, uneasy with the size and sound of it. Maggie and the boys though are excited and compete over car facts. Maggie, who's oldest claims to know the most but the boys argue she can't know much about cars, being a girl. Patricia watches as the driver, a woman, checks the door numbers as the car inches slowly forward on it's skinny wheels.

Mrs. Murphy, who has been sweeping her front step stops and leans against her broom like a sentinel, glaring at the car and its occupant. Mrs. Murphy shares none of the children's excitement and, though she's more than a little curious as to what the car's doing here, she's mostly indignant at the dust it's churning up which is going to settle on her newly swept step.

The car comes to a stop close to where the children are pressed together. They whisper to each other, excitement mounting about the meaning of this stranger in their street, and exchange wild guesses as to what she's doing here. The woman remains seated inside the car, holding on to the steering wheel as if she might just turn the car around and drive away. The children watch her and wait to see what she will do. The silence on the street intensifies, except for Jimmy, who labours on with the piano, oblivious to the excitement outside.

Eventually, the car door opens, and the driver gets out and stands by the car staring at the door to Patricia's house. Her small and slender frame is draped in a knee length blue tea dress pulled in neatly at the waist with a belt. Her tiny hands smooth out her skirt and press sharply against the belt, pulling her into an upright position. Patricia gazes at the stranger's shoes; they are cream and tan with curved heels and a little strap with a brown buckle that stretches over the arch of the woman's foot. It must, Patricia thinks, feel like walking on tiptoe all day. The woman drums her fingers against the roof of the car, her rings flashing in the sun. Her

blonde hair, wispy and thin, has fallen in places from her hair-comb and lies damp against her neck.

Mrs. Murphy has now been joined by Mrs. Bruce, whose substantial arms are placed firmly on her hips, a starched tea towel in one hand and a peeling knife in the other. Their pinafores, stained with the day's work, stretch tightly across their forthright bosoms. In rare silence they remain in their positions, staring at the woman by the car, alert to the scene unfolding before them.

After some minutes of looking at the door to Patricia's house the woman turns and smiles nervously in the direction of the children who stare mutely back. She twists the rings on her fingers then, decisively, she adjusts her hair and walks quickly to the door in her pretty shoes. Maggie gasps and turns, open mouthed, to Patricia who presses her lips tightly together and fights a strong and confusing urge to cry.

Patricia won't look at Maggie, who she knows is staring at her, as her dad opens the door. He remains in the shadow of the doorway, his hand extending briefly into the light to shake the hand of this unexpected visitor. Taking in the car and her expensive clothes, and still being in his work clothes, he does not ask her in. An indistinct sound emerges from the woman who stands with her head bent low towards Patricia's father, her fragile hair radiating around her head in the lowering sun. Her hands, in constant motion, flutter up and down like erratic heartbeats. Apart from the ceaseless gestures of the woman, and the tune being thumped out of the piano by Jimmy, everybody else is as still and silent as an attentive congregation. Occasional disconnected words escape from the woman; 'I can't have, was told their mother's gone, you out of work'. The words are directed into the door of Patricia's home but drift into the street.

Mrs.' Murphy and Bruce edge forward to catch the words, expressing annoyance to each other about Jimmy's insistent piano playing and indeed the uppityness of the boy's mother who thinks it necessary for her child to learn the piano in the first place. Patricia concentrates on their chorus of complaint to avoid the woman's words reaching her.

The woman starts talking more quickly and, obviously excited, her voice rises, and her hands gesture more wildly into the dark doorway. Jimmy stops playing and the woman's words tumble like a landslide into the silence.

It would mean everything to me

You have so many to care for, and the way things are today

They would be happy and - flinging an arm out wide to the street – Better off

The shock of this last statement paralyses everyone present. Patricia doesn't dare turn around and instead looks up at the circling gulls, drifting slowly on the thermals above. The moment lasts for much longer than anyone can bear, and the woman clasps her hands together, twisting her handkerchief like a rosary. Patricia's dad says something that no-one can hear and then quietly closes the door.

Mrs' Murphy and Bruce stare hard at the woman's back shaking their heads. Mrs. Bruce, wiping her knife on her pinafore, mutters that that kind of carry on is a shame and a disgrace, whilst looking strangely satisfied. Cheeky Bitch, pronounces Mrs. Murphy.

The woman stands mortified before the unmoveable door and raises her hand as if to push at it. Then, turning awkwardly on her high heels, she stumbles to her car and throws herself in. She glances out of the window at Patricia who stands from the kerb and moves back, leaning against the wall of her house where she can feel the warmth of the bricks through her dress. The engine roars into life and the woman

tears away as quickly as she can; the skirt of her dress trailing in the road beside her as she goes, leaving behind the predicted cloud of dust.

The piano starts again and the boys, having lost interest in their game of football, wander away to find something else to do. After a quick glance at the closed door of her house Patricia picks up the handkerchief the woman had dropped, which is wet with tears. Holding its lace corner daintily Patricia circles, briefly, on tiptoe and twirls several times till, dizzy, she collapses back down to the pavement, which is cooler now.