

JUDITH KELMAN

'A terrific page turner'

Mary Higgins Clark



SOMEONE'S WATCHING

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Mandarin

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1 The school bus was two stops away. Malcolm Cobb pictured the squat yellow capsule stuffed with boisterous children. He imagined the dizzying pulse of their energies and felt a sympathetic surge of adrenaline. His mouth parched and a fierce tingling shot from the nape of his neck to his groin.

Snapping alert, he was assailed by harsh sensations. There was the throbbing glare of the sun. The shiver of the car's idling engine. Fumes hovered like a gnat swarm in the frigid air.

Time for the final inventory. He mentally reviewed the procedures. All was in readiness.

The preparations had been painstaking. Exhausting. For days, he had used each spare moment to observe the child. Studied his every tic and nuance. Planned the moment of his taking breath by breath.

As always, Cobb's vile job had been the largest obstacle. When he'd most needed to concentrate on his strategy, there was always a fresh crisis at work. He detested the wretched calls and intrusions. Loathed all the mundane tasks and responsibilities that came with his repulsive livelihood. He was nothing but a repairman, a fixer of ruined parts, a lowly mechanic whose days were spent sloshing in the most monstrous filth.

But soon, he would be beyond all that. After this was done, he would be free to pursue his true calling.

One stop away now. The shrill was a summons. A heraldic cry. Cobb yielded to its pull. Easing his cramped foot off the brake pedal, he let the car roll toward the elbow of the road. His pulse was already bound to the child beyond his vision.

He imagined the boy stepping down. Looking this way and that. He savored the image of the child's buoyant

stride, the flush of health, the boundless vigor Cobb would soon claim as his own.

Two more minutes.

Most often, the seconds seemed a promise dangled before him, only to be wrenched away. Stolen. But now time's passage seemed a meager sacrifice. He eyed the limp ruin of his left arm. Caught sight of his grotesque visage in the windshield, shapeless as a mass of pummeled dough.

This was the only path to salvation. He would take what he needed and be healed.

2

James Merritt clambered down from the kindergarten bus and watched it slither away like a snake on fire: flashing red, whining. Fifty yards up Mill Road, it veered out of sight around a hairpin curve, belched a plume of exhaust, and was gone.

Alone, James gazed across the street at the entrance to Tyler's Grove. Squat stone pillars with broken tops marked the neighborhood's border. Once, an older boy with bubble-gum breath had sworn that the pillars were the remains of the original grove owner's twin sons.

As the story went, Mr. and Mrs. Tyler's boys had perished over a century ago in a storm of unfathomable intensity, so fierce the winds had screwed their feet into the ground and wrenched off their heads.

A callow four-year-old at the time, James had seen no reason to challenge the tale. For months he'd been careful not to glance at the pillars, fearful that the calcified Tyler boys might still retain the capacity to bleed. Or worse, to come alive again and chase him in a headless rage all the way to the Kasden's house at the far dead end on Pumpkin Patch Drive.

Now, of course, James was older and far more discerning. In open defiance, he crossed his arms, trained his eyes directly on the stone columns, and stared at them for a minor eternity without blinking.

One was capped by a crushed Coors can and the gutted remains of a sack lunch from Burger King. On the other Fluffy Goldblatt lay sleeping in a fat cinnamon tangle, his signature tail trailing on the insistent wind.

Beyond was a scatter of houses set in no particular order on irregular one-acre plots. Most were clapboard colonials of indeterminate vintage and sparse imagination. There

were several boxy raised ranches and a few jarring cedar contemporaries.

Some parts of the community, like the Merritts' own expanded farmhouse two houses in from the pillars, were remnants of the Tylers' original homestead. So were the old well in front of the Podhoretzes' and the dilapidated gazebo near the DeRosas' and the majestic stand of chestnuts at the border of the Pavans', which had once produced bushels of delicious nuts and now yielded a bumper crop of worms shaped like rice kernels.

The air thrummed with hickory smoke and the hazy glare cast by a ferocious sun. There was the buzzing of a chainsaw, a motorbike revving, the shrill of barking dogs. James squinted through the glare, searching for someone.

He was a sturdy child, shaped like a fireplug, with blunt limbs and a square torso. His coppery hair capped curious blue eyes and a squash-blossom nose salted with freckles. The cold had polished his cheeks, and he sported a rakish fruit-punch mustache from the morning snack. James was a good-looking child. Almost a child's drawing of a child, rendered in clean lines and pleasing angles.

Still no one.

Restless, he deposited his Batman backpack in a hillock of dried leaves and started kicking twigs and stones onto the rutted pavement. Goal kick. Go, Merritt! Atta Boy!

James was the star goalie for the purple and white team in the lollipop division of the Stamford Youth Soccer League. Entrusted to defend the critical area between the two orange traffic cones that served as the goal, James had pioneered a fail-safe strategy. When there was a serious threat from the offense, he simply shoved the cones closer together.

'Attaway, Jamie boy! You show 'em!'

Practising now, he was careful to keep the toes of his blue Nikes safely back on the grass. James was forbidden to cross Mill Road alone, an edict he soundly endorsed. Cars whipped around the blind curves, overshot the narrow lanes, recoiled without warning from the poorly banked shoulders. Wavering shadows played over the sur-

face in an eye-fooling kaleidoscope. There had been frequent accidents. Abundant near-misses. At least two people had been run over in James's memory, and he was only, as he liked to put it, pushing six.

The first, a teenager named Mark something who'd been visiting his cousins on Melon Patch Lane, had been killed, squashed flat as a stomped bug from what James had overheard. And Laurel Druce, a skinny second grader from down the block, had broken her leg in a collision with the U-Haul coming to deliver the McMurrays' lawn furniture. As rumor had it, the shattered bone had pierced Laurel's shin, and the doctor had been obliged to use carpenter's tools to coax it back into its proper position. Some kind of pliers, James had assumed, thinking it inappropriate to ask.

Run over. James shivered and zipped his denim jacket to the chin. His worst and most frequent dream was the one where he was run over by a giant locomotive. He'd be dead asleep, and suddenly tracks would materialize. Enormous metal worms invading his bedroom, coursing through his bed. He couldn't move. Couldn't get away. The train bore down. Closer and closer. There was the thunderous wheeze of pistons, the screaming whistle . . .

His heart was doing a drum roll. James forced the train dream from his mind and resolved to focus on lunch instead. As usual, he would ask his mom for a chocolate chip cookie sandwich on white, and she'd ask whether he preferred mustard or mayonnaise. He'd say ketchup, and she'd ask if he wanted lettuce and tomato. He'd say spinach and banana, please, and they'd both laugh even though they told the same joke in precisely the same words every day. Then she'd make him his regular: peanut butter with an ooze of grape jelly cut in crustless triangles. And a mammoth glass of ice cold milk.

Afterward he'd have a mountain of chocolate chip cookies for dessert. He would consume them in the timeless manner of the toll-house connoisseur, chips first, nuts neatly excised and deposited in an artful arrangement on

the plate. There was a subway rumble in his belly. Hunger. And his bladder was starting to complain.

Come on, somebody.

Usually, his mother was already standing beside Fluffy's pillar when the bus pulled up. He could picture her now, eyes downcast, reading a book. He imagined the way her face would change when she spotted him. Her mouth would move in an exaggerated circle of greeting and then spread in a smile.

Once in a while, when she got stuck late with one of her speech patients at the hospital and couldn't meet the bus, Dad would duck out of the recording studio he'd built in the cottage behind the house and see James safely across Mill Road.

On those days James got to eat his sandwich while he watched a demo session or the laying of background tracks for an album cut. He loved sitting on the throne stool next to the studio's huge electronic sound board, chewing to a bass beat as mysterious as Australia.

James hoped he wasn't going to be spending the day with Mrs. Zielinski, a neighbor who sat for him in a pinch. Mrs. Z was nice enough, but she smelled like bathroom spray. And she insisted on zapping his milk in the microwave to get the chill out even though he'd patiently explained any number of times that he much preferred the chill undisturbed. When she wasn't paying attention, James would sneak a couple of ice cubes into his glass. Then he'd be forced to take mouse sips to avoid any telltale clinking.

The pressure on his bladder was building. James felt the first stirrings of fear. What if they forgot about him altogether? What if he had to stand here until he froze or starved or peed on himself like a two-year-old baby?

No way.

That's the way Todd Holroyd would probably react to the situation: cry and go crazy and wet his pants. Well, James was no sissy wierdo like Odd Todd. Not even close.

If no one showed up in a couple of minutes, James resolved to fly across the street. He'd simply slap his palms

together, take a giant leap, and land next to the broken pillar that was alleged to be the decapitated Tyler twin who'd been born first by three minutes.

James was not afraid to fly. There was almost nothing he feared except getting run over so his bone stuck through his skin like Laurel Druce's. And the train dream. And while he didn't see it as the same brand of fear, he did have a healthy regard for his monster.

James's monster had sour breath, stringy hair, and a stomach filled with hot, green poison. The unsightly creature had taken up residence in James's closet shortly after the Merritts moved to Tyler's Grove from their apartment near the turnpike when James was pushing three. For several weeks, he had felt the heat of the demon's eyes boring into him as he lay in bed. He'd fought sleep, instinctively aware that this particular monster's tastes ran to slumbering children, especially boys. James had many ambitions, but none of them had anything remotely to do with becoming a meal.

When sleep threatened to triumph, James had dragged himself out of bed and slogged into his parents' room, seeking asylum. But neither his mother nor his father would acknowledge that he was in serious jeopardy. One or the other would ply him with empty assurances and shepherd him back to his room.

The issue might have gone unresolved indefinitely. But one night, in frustration, his father had slammed the closest door before ordering James to sleep. At once the child could sense the monster's impotence. The grotesque creature was incapable of opening a simple door.

Salvation.

Several times after that, James had attempted to evict the thing with pleas or admonitions. But the monster was unyielding. Eventually, resigned to cautious coexistence, James had named the monster Vinton after two infamous sixth graders, Vincent Scanlon and Tony Friedberg, who carved unthinkable words in the cafeteria tables and deposited fat wads of used gum in the water fountains.

In school James avoided Vincent and Tony by dawdling

near the teacher until the bullies had selected another diminutive subject for their torments. Nights, he avoided Vinton by following scrupulous precautionary procedures. Before the lights were doused he insisted on being covered to his ears, kissed three times on his forehead, and having the closet door closed until he heard the click. Then his mother had to intone, 'Stay, Vinton!' in her most authoritative voice. The ritual had proved effective. Each morning, he conducted a cursory check, and not once had there been so much as a tooth mark.

Come on already!

James was starving and cold and so impatient he could almost hear his insides rattle. He wanted to pee for an hour and eat a hundred chocolate chip cookie sandwiches with the crusts off. He wanted to tell his mom about how he'd been chosen for the power kids group with a real reader and a spelling book. He wanted to tell her about the shadow man . . .

Maybe if he did his trick.

When James desperately wanted something to happen, he coaxed the benevolent spirits by closing his eyes, holding them shut for precisely five seconds, and opening them very, very slowly. It was a power he reserved for dire emergencies and singular requests.

He forced his lids together until he saw a riot of yellow sparkles dancing on an ebony ground. Determined to make no mistake, he took a deep breath and counted the seconds aloud: 'One, Mississippi . . . two, Mississippi . . .'

'Five.' On the final beat, he released his cramped lids. A flood of brilliant light made his eyes water and reduced the autumn landscape to a blur.

Had it worked?

He struggled to focus. Peered across the undulating blacktop. Wished.

Yes! He spotted her walking toward him. Plodding over the farmhouse lawn. Coming closer. Indistinct in the glare, but definitely her. He could tell by the puff of curly brown hair, the blue coat.

She stopped. Worked her hand in an arc toward her body. Waving for him to cross.

Why didn't she come closer?

Hesitant, James took a quick look up and down Mill Road. No cars he could see, but the street disappeared around a curve no more than half a block away in each direction. He checked back. Yes, she was still gesturing, urging him to hurry.

'Okay,' he said. 'Ready or not, here I come!'

Breath held, he descended the grassy rise and started across the street. He felt a swell of jubilation at the thought of all that waited over that ribbon of blacktop: lunch, hugs, TV, chocolate chip cookies, a warm place to pee.

But then his ear caught a breath of danger. Suddenly, it was hot on his neck. Searing. He tried to run, to back away. No use. He was stone. Scared stiff. It was on him in an instant. All over him in a white, hot, shrieking wave.

And then nothing.

3

Cinnie Merritt jotted a final note in the chart and tucked it into the file drawer marked 'inactive'. Satisfied, she replaced the testing materials in the supply closet nearest the door and shrugged into her coat.

Her office at the Fairview Hospital was on the sixth floor in the freshly renovated rehabilitation wing. The space was generous and cheerful with its sleek furnishings, primary accents, and warm lighting. Most often, it was a perfect foil for Cinnie's optimistic nature. She had inherited her mother's flair for divining scraps of light in the bleakest circumstances and her father's gift for smoothing life's ruts with humor.

The combination had helped her through a recent string of difficult years including her mother's slow, cruel death from Lou Gehrig's disease, her father's precipitous remarriage, and most recently, the difficulties with Paul.

Cinnie couldn't deny that their marriage, product of a romance launched in junior-high-school homeroom, was falling apart. Fraying and unraveling in ways they both seemed powerless to define or arrest. Lately, he'd taken to sleeping most nights in the cottage behind the farmhouse, which he'd spent years and a fortune converting into a state-of-the-art recording studio.

Paul's moving out seemed oddly anticlimactic. He'd been gone, in a palpable way, for months. But Cinnie could still sense the resonating hum of his presence in her bones. And she still ached for the remembered connection between them that had once been as easy and natural as a breath.

But none of that was the cause of her present unease. Something she could not identify had been prickling at her all day, nagging like an invisible burr. It was one of those inexplicable feelings she had from time to time. A

splinter of the world out of place. A beat missing. Annoying as a crooked picture on a crooked wall. And as impossible to set right.

She paused at the broad, plate window and spotted Dal and TeeJay walking out of the hospital and across the parking lot. They were holding hands, their matching caps of cropped ginger hair ruffled by the wind. TeeJay's little legs worked like a windmill as he tried to keep up with his mother's exuberant stride. Dal was gesticulating with her free hand and talking nonstop. Everything back to normal.

Dal, Cinnie's closest friend, had called earlier in a panic, certain TeeJay had developed a serious problem. She'd declined to describe the symptoms over the phone. 'You have to see for yourself, Cin. And as soon as possible. It's awful.'

Cinnie had told Dal to bring him in at noon, right after her last scheduled morning patient. Hanging up, she'd felt a hard tug of anxiety. After all of Dal's breathless false alarms about her little boy, maybe this time the crisis was real. Maybe that was the source of Cinnie's crooked picture.

She'd decided it made sense to see them at the hospital. If whatever it was proved to be out of her field, she knew she could find the right specialist at Fairview for a quick consultation. Dr. Ferris, the pediatrician they both used for their children's routine ailments and inspections, had no skill in managing Dal's hysteria. He would simply tell her not to worry, which was about as effective as ordering someone not to think of an elephant.

Cinnie had called Paul in the studio and asked him to meet James at the bus stop at twelve. He'd sounded distracted. Distant. But that was standard for the new model Paul. The stranger.

The sky was glazed with sunlight and a shimmer of frost. Shading her eyes with cupped fingers, Cinnie watched as Dal unlocked her gray Jeep and strapped TeeJay into his car seat.

Terrific little boy. Bright and eager with the perfect

pinch of silliness. He had caught his father's passion for football and now refused to leave the house without rolled-sock shoulder pads and a plastic helmet. From six storeys up, he resembled a travel-sized can of spray deodorant. Adorable kid. And perfectly fine.

If only Dal could relax and enjoy him.

Cinnie felt a twinge of guilt. She knew that living in Tyler's Grove was at the root of Dal's problem. The neighborhood was a rich breeding ground for maternal insecurities. There was an unhealthy, unforgiving spotlight on the children. Which was best, brightest, biggest? The kids were scrutinized like fruit in a grocery bin. Only perfect would do.

Soon after she and Paul moved in, Cinnie had been buffeted by the undertow of jealous comparisons. Casual talks between the mothers tended to turn mean and ugly. That one's daughter couldn't make friends. This one's son was doing terribly in school. Had she noticed that the other one's little girl was getting fat?

Cinnie had tried to pass it all off as petty nonsense, but on some level, she knew it was more than that. There was a desperate edge to the nastiness here. It hung like a poison vapor in the neighborhood's tranquil air.

Still, when Dal and Rick had talked about buying a house in the area, Cinnie had done everything in her power to sell them on Tyler's Grove. She'd wanted so badly to have Dal nearby, she hadn't allowed herself to consider how the venom of envy might affect her friend. After all, she rationalized, Tyler's Grove was no better or worse than any other family neighborhood. Certainly they hadn't cornered the market on bitchy, insecure women who polished their children and set them out on display.

Cinnie knew you didn't have to let it affect you. She'd managed to find her way around the minefield of jealousy. When the women were at their worst, she could tune them out like radio static. Simple. All she had to do was focus on that luscious little boy of hers. No contest.

But honest, vulnerable Dal was a frequent victim.

This morning's mock emergency had to do with TeeJay's

repeating an occasional word or syllable. Dal had convinced herself that the little boy was doomed to a life of severe stuttering, struggling to communicate, each word a physical and emotional ordeal.

As usual, Lydia Holroyd, a neighbor of Dal's and Cinnie's, had planted the bomb. Lydia took obscene pleasure in preying on Dal's apprehensions. Nothing that hideous woman enjoyed more than studying TeeJay and commenting on his imaginary deficits in her overblown British accent. She sounded as if she'd been born with a whalebone tongue and nostrils sewn shut like the pockets of a new suit.

'Stuttering, my, my,' she'd told Dal, shaking her head in mock sympathy, 'poor thing must be suffering from dreadful stress and tension. Perhaps you put too much pressure on the boy, Dahlia.'

It had taken Cinnie about thirty seconds to confirm that the 'stuttering' was an innocent, common phase in language development that would disappear on its own in a month or two. For good measure, she'd put TeeJay through an abbreviated battery of speech and language tests. No doubt Dal could use tangible reassurances like high scores and enviable percentile rankings. It was the first time in ten years on the job that Cinnie had conducted an evaluation on a child wearing a Giants' helmet complete with chin strap and face cage.

Afterward she'd settled TeeJay on the waiting room floor with a heap of toys and tried to put her friend at ease.

Dal was pitched forward in the visitor's chair like an expectant pinball. 'It's serious, isn't it, Cin? Be honest with me.'

'Very serious. Poor kid has a crazy mother.'

'But Lydia said . . .'

Cinnie puffed her disgust. 'First, it was the bedwetting, then the invisible rash, then his brain was going to turn to tapioca from watching cartoons and he was going to perish because you don't hand-grind his peanut butter. When are you going to stop listening to that woman?'