

# WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

A novel by Mary Higgins Clark



**MARY  
HIGGINS  
CLARK**

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THE CHILDREN?**

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*To the memory of my mother,  
Nora C. Higgins,  
with love, admiration and gratitude*

# WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

## Prologue

HE COULD FEEL THE CHILL coming in through the cracks around the windowpanes. Clumsily he got up and lumbered over to the window. Reaching for one of the thick towels he kept handy, he stuffed it around the rotting frame.

The incoming draft made a soft, hissing sound in the towel, a sound that vaguely pleased him. He looked out at the mist-filled sky and studied the whitecaps churning in the water. From this side of the house it was often possible to see Provincetown, on the opposite shore of Cape Cod Bay.

He hated the Cape. He hated the bleakness of it on a November day like this; the stark grayness of the water; the stolid people who didn't say much but studied you with their eyes. He had hated it the one summer he'd been here—waves of tourists sprawling on the beaches; climbing up the steep embankment to this

house; gawking in the downstairs windows, cupping their hands over their eyes to peer inside.

He hated the large FOR SALE sign that Ray Eldredge had posted on the front and back of the big house and the fact that now Ray and that woman who worked for him had begun bringing people in to see the house. Last month it had been only a matter of luck that he'd come along as they'd started through; only luck that he'd gotten to the top floor before they had and been able to put away the telescope.

Time was running out. Somebody would buy this house and he wouldn't be able to rent it again. That was why he'd sent the article to the paper. He wanted to still be here to enjoy seeing her exposed for what she was in front of these people . . . now, when she must have started to feel safe.

There was something else that he had to do, but the chance had never come. She kept such a close watch on the children. But he couldn't afford to wait anymore. Tomorrow . . .

He moved restlessly around the room. The bedroom of the top-floor apartment was large. The whole house was large. It was a bastardized evolution of an old captain's house. Begun in the seventeenth century on a rocky crest that commanded a view of the whole bay, it was a pretentious monument to man's need to be forever on guard.

Life wasn't like that. It was bits and pieces. Icebergs that showed in tips. He knew. He rubbed his hand over his face, feeling warm and uncomfortable even though the room was chilly. For six years now he'd rented this house in the late summer and fall. It was almost exactly as it had been when he had first come into it. Only a few things were different: the telescope in the front room; the clothes that he kept for the special times; the peaked cap that he pulled over his face, which shaded it so well.

Otherwise the apartment was the same: the old-fashioned sofa and pine tables and hooked rug in the living room; the rock maple bedroom set. This house and apartment had been ideal for his purpose until this fall, when Ray Eldredge had told him they were actively trying to sell the place for a restaurant and it could be rented only with the understanding it could be shown on telephoned notice.

Raynor Eldredge. The thought of the man brought a smile. What would Ray think tomorrow when he saw the story? Had Nancy ever told Ray who she was? Maybe not. Women could be sly. If Ray didn't know, it would be even better. How wonderful it would be to actually see Ray's expression when he opened the paper! It was delivered a little after ten in the morning. Ray would be in his office. He might not even look at it for a while.



Impatiently, he turned from the window. His thick, trunklike legs were tight in shiny black trousers. He'd be glad when he could lose some of this weight. It would mean that awful business of starving himself again, but he could do it. When it had been necessary he'd done it before. Restlessly he rubbed a hand over his vaguely itchy scalp. He'd be glad when he could let his hair grow back in its natural lines again. The sides had always been thick and would probably be mostly gray now.

He ran one hand slowly down his trouser leg, then impatiently paced around the apartment, finally stopping at the telescope in the living room. The telescope was especially powerful—the kind of equipment that wasn't available for general sale. Even many police departments didn't have it yet. But there were always ways to get things you wanted. He bent over and peered into it, squinting one eye.

Because of the darkness of the day, the kitchen light was on, so it was easy to see Nancy clearly. She was standing in front of the kitchen window, the one that was over the sink. Maybe she was about to get something ready to put into the oven for dinner. But she had a warm jacket on, so she was probably going out. She was standing quietly, just looking in the direction of the water. What was she thinking of? Whom was

she thinking of? The children—Peter . . . Lisa . . . ? He'd like to know.

He could feel his mouth go dry and licked his lips nervously. She looked very young today. Her hair was pulled back from her face. She kept it dark brown. Someone would surely have recognized her if she'd left it the natural red-gold shade. Tomorrow she'd be thirty-two. But she still didn't look her age. She had an intriguing young quality, soft and fresh and silky.

He swallowed nervously. He could feel the feverish dryness of his mouth, even while his hands and armpits were wet and warm. He gulped, then swallowed again, and the sound evolved into a deep chuckle. His whole body began to shake with mirth and jarred the telescope. Nancy's image blurred, but he didn't bother refocusing the lens. He wasn't interested in watching her anymore today.

*Tomorrow!* He could just see the expression she'd have at this time tomorrow. Exposed to the world for what she was; numbed with worry and fear; trying to answer the question . . . the same question the police had thrown at her over and over seven years ago.

"Come on, Nancy," the police would be saying again. "Come clean with us. Tell the truth. You should know you can't get away with this. Tell us, Nancy—where are the children?"



## One

RAY CAME DOWN THE STAIRS pulling the knot closed on his tie. Nancy was sitting at the table with a still-sleepy Missy on her lap. Michael was eating his breakfast in his poised, reflective way.

Ray tousled Mike's head and leaned over to kiss Missy. Nancy smiled up at him. She was so darn pretty. There were fine lines around those blue eyes, but you'd still never take her for thirty-two. Ray was only a few years older himself, but always felt infinitely her senior. Maybe it was that awful vulnerability. He noticed the traces of red at the roots of her dark hair. A dozen times in the last year he'd wanted to ask her to let it grow out, but hadn't dared.

"Happy birthday, honey," he said quietly.

He watched as the color drained from her face.

Michael looked surprised. "Is it Mommy's birthday? You didn't tell me that."

Missy sat upright. "Mommy's birthday?" She sounded pleased.

"Yes," Ray told them. Nancy was staring down at the table. "And tonight we're going to celebrate. Tonight I'm going to bring home a big birthday cake and a present, and we'll have Aunt Dorothy come to dinner. Right, Mommy?"

"Ray . . . no." Nancy's voice was low and pleading.

"Yes. Remember, last year you promised that this year we'd . . ."

Celebrate was the wrong word. He couldn't say it. But for a long time he'd known that they would someday have to start changing the pattern of her birthdays. At first she'd withdrawn completely from him and gone around the house or walked the beach like a silent ghost in a world of her own.

But last year she'd finally begun to talk about them . . . the two other children. She'd said, "They'd be so big now . . . ten and eleven. I try to think how they would look now, but can't seem to even imagine. . . . Everything about that time is so blurred. Like a nightmare that I only dreamed."

"It's supposed to be like that," Ray told her. "Put it all behind you, honey. Don't even wonder what happened anymore."

The memory strengthened his decision. He

bent over Nancy and patted her hair with a gesture that was at once protective and gentle.

Nancy looked up at him. The appeal on her face changed to uncertainty. "I don't think—"

Michael interrupted her. "How old are you, Mommy?" he asked practically.

Nancy smiled—a real smile that miraculously eased the tension. "None of your business," she told him.

Ray took a quick gulp of her coffee. "Good girl," he said. "Tell you what, Mike. I'll pick you up after school this afternoon and we'll go get a present for Mommy. Now I'd better get out of here. Some guy is coming up to see the Hunt place. I want to get the file together."

"Isn't it rented?" Nancy asked.

"Yes. That Parrish fellow who's taken the apartment on and off has it again. But he knows we have the right to show it anytime. It's a great spot for a restaurant and wouldn't take much to convert. It'll make a nice commission if I sell it."

Nancy put Missy down and walked with him to the door. He kissed her lightly and felt her lips tremble under his. How much had he upset her by starting this birthday talk? Some instinct made him want to say, *Let's not wait for tonight. I'll stay home and we'll take the kids and go to Boston for the day.*

Instead he got into his car, waved, backed up and drove onto the narrow dirt lane that wound

through an acre of woods until it terminated on the cross-Cape road that led to the center of Adams Port and his office.

Ray was right, Nancy thought as she walked slowly back to the table. There was a time to stop following the patterns of yesterday—a time to stop remembering and look only to the future. She knew that a part of her was still frozen. She knew that the mind dropped a protective curtain over painful memories—but it was more than that.

It was as though her life with Carl were a blur . . . the entire time. It was hard to remember the faculty house on the campus, Carl's modulated voice . . . Peter and Lisa. What had they looked like? Dark hair, both of them, like Carl's, and too quiet . . . too subdued . . . affected by her uncertainty . . . and then lost—both of them.

"Mommy, why do you look so sad?" Michael gazed at her with Ray's candid expression, spoke with Ray's directness.

*Seven years*, Nancy thought. Life was a series of seven-year cycles. Carl used to say that your whole body changed in that time. Every cell renewed itself. It was time for her to really look ahead . . . to forget.

She glanced around the large, cheerful kitchen with the old brick fireplace, the wide oak floors, the red curtains and valances that

didn't obstruct the view over the harbor. And then she looked at Michael and Missy. . . .

"I'm not sad darling," she said. "I'm really not."

She scooped Missy up in her arms, feeling the warmth and sweet stickiness of her. "I've been thinking about your present," Missy said. Her long strawberry-blond hair curled around her ears and forehead. People sometimes asked where she got that beautiful hair—who had been the redhead in the family?

"Great," Nancy told her. "But think about it outside. You'd better get some fresh air soon. It's supposed to rain later and get very cold."

After the children were dressed, she helped them on with their windbreakers and hats. "There's my dollar," Michael said with satisfaction as he reached into the breast pocket of his jacket. "I was sure I left it here. Now I can buy you a present."

"Me has money too." Missy proudly held up a handful of pennies. "Oh, now, you two shouldn't be carrying your money out," Nancy told them. "You'll only lose it. Let me hold it for you."

Michael shook his head. "If I give it to you, I might forget it when I go shopping with Daddy."

"I promise I won't let you forget it."

"My pocket has a zipper. See? I'll keep it in that, and I'll hold Missy's for her."



“Well . . .” Nancy shrugged and gave up the discussion. She knew perfectly well that Michael wouldn’t lose the dollar. He was like Ray, well organized. “Now, Mike, I’m going to straighten up. You be sure to stay with Missy.”

“Okay,” Michael said cheerfully. “Come on, Missy. I’ll push you on the swing first.”

Ray had built a swing for the children. It was suspended from a branch of the massive oak tree at the edge of the woods behind their house.

Nancy pulled Missy’s mittens over her hands. They were bright red; fuzzy angora stitching formed a smile face on their backs. “Leave these on,” she told her; “otherwise your hands will get cold. It’s really getting raw. I’m not even sure you should go out at all.”

“Oh, please!” Missy’s lip began to quiver.

“All right, all right, don’t go into the act,” Nancy said hastily. “But not more than half an hour.”

She opened the back door and let them out, then shivered as the chilling breeze enveloped her. She closed the door quickly and started up the staircase. The house was an authentic old Cape, and the stairway was almost totally vertical. Ray said that the old settlers must have had a bit of mountain goat in them the way they built their staircases. But Nancy loved everything about this place.