

Tinkler Man

by Phillis Ideal

As the light changed and exhaustion set in, Suzy and Molly batted back and forth one more knock knock joke to avoid going home. They were cutting their teeth on life beyond their families, and both were delighted to have their first best friend. Every afternoon the girls sat cross-legged on the grass across from one another with the street separating them. They had been told not to cross the street so they would sit on the curb's edge of their yards and talk or scream when the roar of whizzing cars drowned their small voices. Tim, Molly's Irish setter dog sat quietly next to her.

Slowly, a battered old navy-colored car pulled up on Molly's side of the street. The parked car blocked Molly's view of Suzy. Molly was disappointed to have her conversation with Suzy interrupted. The male driver reached across the passenger car seat and rolled the window half way down. Molly could barely see his shaded face from her seat on the grass but his voice was loud and clear.

"My name is John and I live in the neighborhood. I have lost my Irish setter dog, and when I saw your dog, I hoped it was mine, making friends with you. Have you seen an Irish setter dog like yours running loose?"

Molly shook her head "No", trying to remember if she had ever seen him in the neighborhood and wanting him to leave to get back to talking to Suzy.

"My dog is my best friend and I am afraid he is gone. I see you have a good friend across the street to talk to."

Grownups always ruin everything, I am supposed to be polite to grownups and he is a grownup. But I am not supposed to talk to strangers.

He leaned in further and rolled the window down as far as it would go. "It must be nice to spend the day talking to your friend."

Molly nodded.

"I would like to be your friend. Would you let me be your friend? I would like to get to know you. What is your name? How old are you?"

Molly was used to these questions from adults and automatically answered, "Molly. I'm six."

He raised his voice and spoke rapidly, "Oh, I remember when I was six. One of my favorite things was chocolate ice cream. Can you keep a secret? When I was your age, I used to take money out of my mother's purse when she wasn't looking and buy an ice cream cone from the ice cream man. Do you ever do anything you aren't supposed to do? I am good at keeping secrets."

Molly wondered if Suzy was still on the other side of the street hidden by the car or had stood up and gone home.

He swung the door open on the passenger side, cupped his hand and beckoned for Molly to get in the car. "Jump in and we will go around the block to the Dairy Queen on Second Street and get some ice cream." She didn't move but looked at the car. It was old and chunky, with peeling paint that exposed rust map shapes like imaginary countries in her coloring book. It didn't look like a car she had ever seen before. Molly noticed the seat between them had a torn plastic cover with dried, yellow foam pushing out of seat, showing black wire springs. Molly saw the man's face in a shaft of afternoon light: thinning black hair with ruddy cheeks and small broken blood vessels on the sides of his nose.

She didn't get in the car but stayed next to Tim. "My mother doesn't want me to cross the street. I can't go with you to get ice cream. I am not supposed to talk to strangers."

The man's face flushed and twisted into a sneer. His voice was harsh and throaty. "What is your dog's name?"

"Tim."

"Does Tim go everywhere with you?"

When Tim heard his name, he cocked his ears and let out a whining growl, stretched and sat up on his haunches, poised to go home. Molly watched the man's hand moving under a white towel in his lap. The man began to shake, jolted up and threw off the towel.

He was stoking himself. Molly had never seen a man's tinkler but had seen the next-door neighbor three-year-old twins when they were taken to the bathroom to "tinkle". This man's tinkler was large and red like the color of his checks, and white stuff was spurting out of it.

A voice inside her screamed, "This is a bad man who will hurt me." She turned her head and yelled in the urgent voice of her mother, "Molly, Molly, come home at once!" She stood up and looked back at the man. "My mother is calling me and I have to go home."

She ran as fast as she could. Her shoes pounded up the front steps and she tore through the front room, feet flying over the blotches of the Oriental rug. Her mother, grandmother and grandfather were sitting at the kitchen table; but their voices were very far away. She ran past the kitchen door, down the hall into her grandmother's bedroom and scrambled under the bed. She pulled herself into a ball, and wrapped her arms around her knees, rocking back and forth. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she began to sob. And Tim lay by her side, licking her tears and slapping her face with his tongue.

It was years before Molly made it again to the *Dairy Queen*.

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