

## STRAYS

Michael Dillon goes to school on the little bus. That's the way the world is divided as far as I can see: big-bus people and little-bus people; people who have real parents and people like me who have foster ones. Don't get me wrong: I like the Wilkinsons. They're quite smiley and don't mind giving you a buck when you need it. Their real kids are long gone, so there's no one glaring at you across the breakfast table silently accusing you of muscling in on their territory. The only problem with the Wilkinsons is the same thing Huck Finn says about the Widow Douglas in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mrs. Wilkinson gave me this fancy hardcover of it for my thirteenth birthday and I just finished it. Didn't I say they were nice? Anyway, Huck says the Widow is caring, but awful regular and dismal in her ways. That's kind of like the Wilkinsons. The first time I asked her about a dog, Mrs. Wilkinson said, "No, dear, we've never had a dog." Excuse me, but is that a reason not to get a dog? Does that mean I can never get a car or a perm—just because I've never had one? Regular and dismal. Mr. Wilkinson collects *stamps* for God's sake. When I asked him about a dog, he raised his eyebrow. He does that a lot. Usually it's the left, but this time it was the right, which meant he was really perplexed. He didn't say "no" just because they'd never had one. He looked at me over his glasses and said, "Callie, I don't think that would be possible." Now, if some morning when the school bus pulled up and I decided not to get on, just said, "I don't think that would be possible," you can be sure that I'd be picked up body and bones and dumped on that bus in about two seconds. But, like I

said, that's the way the world is divided: those who have to get on the school bus and those who don't. Those who have a dog and those with no dog.

When I lived with the O'Keefes we had three dogs. And don't even talk about the cats. Two house cats, three or four barn cats, and all kinds of strays. When I mentioned that to Mrs. Wilkinson, she said, "But that was a farm, dear. We're on Collett Street. It's hardly the same thing, is it?"

Old Mr. O'Keefe had a heart attack. That's why I'm not there anymore. Mrs. O'Keefe couldn't take care of me on her own. She's sick a lot and hardly ever goes out—just sits at the kitchen table drinking tea. And she stopped liking me because I was the one who found Mr. O'Keefe. Sometimes she'd look at me like it was my fault. It wasn't even me who actually found him. Topper found him. He's a setter and was Mr. O'Keefe's favourite dog. I was hardly off the school bus that day when I heard him barking and yapping like it was the end of the world. Topper hardly barks at all, usually, so I knew something was wrong. I went over to the dairy and found him sitting next to Mr. O'Keefe. Topper started whingin' and whining. Mr. O'Keefe was splayed out like a face-down snow angel. There were dead flies in the milk pail he'd been carrying, and half the milk was spilled. You can imagine the start I got. Mr. O'Keefe was the first dead person I ever saw. Well, I really only saw his back. I knew right away he was dead, though, because he looked so small and crumpled. And there were flies walking around on the back of his neck. I didn't see him at the wake, either, because I didn't go. I wanted to. I liked Mr. O'Keefe—even though he was kind of old and I'd only been there a few months and didn't know

him all that well. But Mrs. O’Keefe wouldn’t let me. She said I was too young and technically I wasn’t related. It wasn’t long after that when I got shipped off to the Wilkinsons. I went from a farm to a subdivision; from three dogs to no dogs.

I’ve always liked animals, dogs in particular. When I was at the Petersons—that was my first foster home—Brian Peterson brought a stray beagle puppy home and they let him keep it. *Brian Peterson*. What a little criminal. He was always stealing my stuff. He probably stole the dog out of someone’s backyard. Anyway, he named it Sergeant, which I thought was a dumb name for a cute little beagle who was always piddling all over the floor. Sergeant sounds like something you’d call a pit bull or a Doberman. And then a week later when we found out that Sergeant was actually a *girl*, he still didn’t change the name. Not that girls can’t be sergeants, but it didn’t seem right to me. Sergeant used to come into my room at night and I’d talk to her. She’d listen, too. And when she got excited about what I was saying, she’d jump up and lick me all over. People always talk about how beagles got great noses—good for hunting and all that—but they’re good listeners, too. You can tell a beagle your whole life story and she’ll never get bored.

But I was telling you about Michael Dillon who goes to school on the little bus. He goes to Pinewood Academy like me, but he’s in the portable classroom with the other students who take the little bus. They’re “special” students. Anyway, Mrs. Wilkinson was taking me shopping one day, and who should I see out the car window? Michael Dillon. He was walking a dog. And not just any dog, either. It was a black-and-white miniature collie, a Sheltie. We drove past so quickly that it was all kind of a blur. But it was definitely him. Michael Dillon is not the kind of

person you mix up with somebody else. He's got thick glasses and thick lips and a tongue that looks about three sizes too big for his mouth. He's fat around the middle like Mr. Wilkinson and he walks funny. He doesn't exactly *limp* like some of the other little-bus people; it's almost like he's walking on eggs and trying not to break them. So I knew it was him.

The next day I went to the school library and asked for the dog encyclopaedia. There's a whole section on collies with lots of colour pictures of miniatures. Those sharp, foxy faces and sweet brown eyes and delicate little legs . . . . And expensive, too. Not the kind of dog you're going to find at the Pound and can take home for the price of the operation and the shots. And here was little-bus Michael Dillon with a miniature collie—or walking one, anyway.

When I was at the Hanlons a few years ago their grey tomcat, Greyun, went missing. *Greyun*: another dopey name. It's really "Grey One" but all run together so it sounds like Greyun. Don't get me started. They called him that because he was absolutely, totally grey. Lots of times Greyun would go off for a couple of days, but he always turned up sooner or later—usually matted and dirty with a scabby ear or leg. But this time he was gone about a week. Lizzie Hanlon, who owned him, was really upset. She never used to talk much to me, but now she kept asking me where I thought he was. I said he was probably off fighting with the other cats. I mean, how was I supposed to know? Everyone was on the look-out and Lizzie plastered all the telephone poles with fifty-dollar reward posters. Greyun wasn't my favourite cat, but I was worried too. And then when I was taking a shortcut home from school one day, I smelled this

gross, sickening smell coming from the ditch on a little side road near the house. I looked down and saw a patch of grey among the forget-me-nots and the bluebells. There were flies buzzing around like anything. I went home and it was ages before I could work up the nerve to tell Lizzie. Well, she started screaming and screeching, and as soon as her father came home we all had to traipse down to that ditch. Poor Mr. Hanlon waded into the flowers and stinger nettles, picked up the cat and dropped him into a shopping bag. He just about turned green. The cat had obviously been smacked by a car. We took him to a patch of woods and buried him. It was pretty sad. Lizzie said prayers over him, which I thought was overdoing it a bit—especially since none of the Hanlons ever went to church. And then the very next day when we were sitting down to supper we heard this scratching at the back porch. A very *familiar* scratching. We looked at each other with big eyes and then Lizzie bolted for the door. And who should waltz into the room as nice as you please? Greyun. A little dirty and thin, but alive as anything. He curled around Lizzie's legs and started meowing for his supper. What can I say? We buried the wrong cat. Somebody else's grey cat. Or a stray. And if he was a stray, well, he was cried and prayed over just like he'd been a regular family cat.

The day after I saw Michael Dillon with the collie, I asked Suze Maloney about him. She sits behind me. Suze is one of those people who knows things. Not school work things—real things.

“He's Down's,” she said.

“He's what?”

“Down’s Syndrome. Tina Roberts’ little sister is Down’s, too.”

“So, he’s like . . . retarded or something?”

Suze shrugged. “I guess. I mean, he takes the little bus.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And all the Down’s sort of look alike. You know—kind of weird.” She popped a Juicy Fruit into her mouth. “Why do you want to know about him?”

“I saw him with this really nice dog.”

“Oh.”

Suze is not into dogs. She likes horses. Typical. She could be the girl in that horse movie she’s always talking about—the old one: *National Velvet*. She’s got the DVD and she can just about recite the whole thing. Don’t get me wrong: I like horses, too. They’re very pretty—especially when they’re galloping across a meadow or shaking their manes or rubbing their necks against each other. But you can’t talk to a horse. Or cuddle with it. I mean, I couldn’t talk to a horse the way I used to talk to Sergeant. And when you look into their eyes . . . well, there’s nothing really there. All that’s in a horse’s eyes is . . . *horsiness*. But Suze doesn’t see it that way. She went mad when I told her I’d lived on a farm that had horses. She used to get me to tell about them; that’s how we became friends. But I never had too much to say. To me, horses are just totally horses. The only way you can talk to a horse is if you’re another horse. And I’ll bet even then they don’t say much. I mean, did you ever see a horse standing out in a meadow for hours on end and hardly moving an inch except to flick at flies with its tail? The O’Keefe’s

horses used to do that. Side by side like statues. For *hours*. Can you picture a dog doing that? I don't think so. A dog would want to be at something—chasing something; smelling something. You know—having a life. No, horses are nice, but dogs . . . dogs got a little human in them.

The next Saturday I got on my bike and thought I'd see if I could figure out where Michael Dillon lived. I *sort* of remembered where I'd seen him, but, like I said, we were going pretty fast and there are tons of tangly streets all around us. And most of the houses are townhouses—“cookie-cutter” Mrs. Wilkinson calls them. She kind of turns up her nose when she says it. You'd swear their house was a mansion or something. Some joke. I mean, it's not attached, but it's only a bungalow. Anyway, I had no luck. I was just heading home when I saw Tony Best drinking a Coke outside a Needs Convenience. He's in the class across from me. I thought about asking him if he knew where Michael Dillon lived. But he would've made fun—would've wanted to know why I was looking for little-bus Michael Dillon. And, well, I wasn't really looking for *him* at all.

I know what you're thinking: Why didn't I just go up to Michael at school and ask him about the collie? Ask him where he lived so I could maybe go and take a look. Well, it wasn't so easy. You see, the little-bus people stick to themselves. But I guess I've always known they don't necessarily want it that way. It's more that the big-bus people worry they'll look desperate for a friend if anyone sees them talking to a little-bus person. And I know about that kind of thing

better than anyone, because that's how some people treat me—you know, because I'm a foster child. Lots of kids won't even look at me—probably think I'm going to steal their lunch money. Suze is my only *real* friend. So the last thing I needed was to get lumped in with the little-bus people. And there was another thing. A lot of little-bus people have these grown-ups with them all the time—you know, to help them. They're sort of like teachers, but they're not real teachers because everyone calls them by their first name—even the kids. Michael Dillon's got one: a lady—a really fat lady with little eyes and streaky red cheeks who looks vexed all the time. I forget her name: Jackie or Josie or something. She's always pulling on Michael's arm whenever they're walking across the schoolyard. He usually seems pretty determined to go in the other direction from her, and I can't say I blame him. Whenever it's nice out they have recess and lunch on the picnic table by the portable classroom. Anyway, I didn't feel like going up to Michael when she was around.

But one day during lunch Michael was sitting with somebody different: a young woman. She had bangs and a ponytail and she was unwrapping his peanut butter sandwiches. You could tell right away she was nice. I stood by the chain-link fence and watched them. She was so patient while she waited for him to finish chewing, and it took him *forever*. It was kind of gross if you want to know the truth: he looked like he was swallowing glue. But she just held up the next sandwich and smiled and brushed the crumbs from his shirt and didn't care that it was taking so long.



Suddenly she turned and saw me staring. I turned as red as anything and was about to walk away, but she smiled and said, “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Michael certainly likes his peanut butter sandwiches. Don’t you, Michael?”

Michael just kept chewing.

“I saw him with a dog,” I said. I don’t know *why* I blurted it out like that.

She turned to Michael. “Is that right? Have you got a dog?”

Michael gurgled something through his sandwich.

“You do?” said the girl. She turned back to me. “I don’t know too much about Michael. I’m just filling in.”

Michael reached for his milk.

“Is it a big dog or a little dog?” the girl asked.

Michael looked at her and nodded.

She laughed. “Both? That’s quite a dog.”

“It’s a collie,” I said. “A miniature.”

She raised her eyebrows at Michael. “Well, that’s impressive. You must be the only person on Howley Place with a miniature collie.”

*Howley Place*. It didn’t ring a bell, but the Wilkinsons would know where it was.

“You want to sit down?” said the girl.

I looked over my shoulder. “Well . . .”

She laughed. “No one’s looking at you. I’m Peg.”

“I’m Callie,” I said, sliding in beside her.

“This is Callie,” she said to Michael. He didn’t answer.

“What’s his dog’s name?” I asked.

Peg shrugged. “Ask him.”

Michael was staring across the schoolyard. He didn’t seem to know I was there. “What’s your dog’s name?”

He looked at me and frowned. “He-ro.”

I looked at Peg. “Hero? Is the dog’s name Hero?”

Peg grinned. “No. He’s saying *hello*.”

“He can’t talk?”

“Oh, he can talk. Can’t you, Michael? You’ve just got your own special accent.”

“He-ro,” said Michael again.

“What’s your dog’s name?” said Peg, polishing his apple on her knee. “What’s your collie’s name?”

And when he answered, I knew right away what he was saying, even though the words came out all thick and lumpy like Mrs. Wilkinson’s porridge.

“I got a dog,” he said.

“Yes, but what’s his *name*?” said Peg. But Michael just took his apple and stared across the schoolyard. Peg grinned at me. “I’ll have to find out.”

The bell rang and I got up. “I should go.”

“Well, see you,” said Peg. “Nice to meet you.”

I walked away but then stopped and turned back. “Bye, Michael,” I said.

He bit into his apple and looked at me through his thick glasses. “I got a dog,” he said.

*I know, I thought. You certainly do.*

It turned out that Howley Place is practically in my backyard, just about a two-minute walk from the Wilkinsons. But it’s kind of hidden: a little cul-de-sac off another street. Mrs. Wilkinson pointed it out for me when we were driving to church the next evening. We always go to the seven o’clock Saturday mass at Corpus Christi. Both of the Wilkinsons are pretty churchy—Mrs. Wilkinson in particular. There’s a big picture of Jesus in the kitchen: the one where he has those dreamy Spaniel eyes and he’s pointing at his bleeding heart. And she always blesses herself whenever we drive past a church or a graveyard. I’ve even seen her kneeling by her bed, praying with her rosary beads, just like a little child. Once I stopped outside her bedroom door and listened. I think she might have been praying for me. I definitely heard my name a couple of times.

I rode over to Howley Place the first thing Sunday morning. It’s public housing: about twenty “cookie-cutter” duplexes. I could just picture Mrs. Wilkinson turning up her nose. And these *were* pretty run down.

I didn't even see a mutt, let alone a miniature collie. Cats, yes. Every second window had a cat staring out. But no dogs. And no Michael Dillon.

The next afternoon I beat it over to Howley Place again. I'd figured it would take the little bus a lot longer to drop everybody off, and I was right. I was waiting about twenty minutes when it finally pulled up. The driver helped Michael out and led him up to number nine. The door clicked open, and a grey-haired woman took Michael's bookbag and led him inside.

Suddenly a little girl—she couldn't have been more than four—peddled madly up to me on her tricycle. “Who are you?” she said, shoving a crumpled bag of Doritos at me. “Wanna chip?”

“No thanks. I'm Callie. Do you know Michael Dillon?”

She swivelled around on the tricycle seat. “Who lives *there*?” she said, pointing at number nine with the Doritos.

“Yeah.”

She nodded. “Him and his mom live there.”

“Do you know his dog's name?”

“My name's Joanie.”

“That's nice. But—”

Just then the door to number nine opened, and the collie jumped out onto the step and shook himself. Michael followed with the leash.

I could see right away how beautiful the collie was. He was mainly black and white, like I remembered, but there was a lot of tan, too—especially on his chest. You could tell he'd probably been indoors all day. He was wagging his tail like mad—just going crazy. I was worried he was going to throw his hip out. That happens a lot with miniatures. The encyclopaedia says it's because their legs are so short.

"That's Prince," said Joanie.

*Prince*. How original. Sergeant, Greyun, Prince . . . doesn't anyone know how to name animals anymore?

They started walking down the sidewalk towards us. When they drew up close I got my first good look at Prince. Like I said, he was beautiful. But I could see that his coat needed a good brushing and that his eyes were a little rheumy.

"Hi, Michael," I said. "Remember me?" He glanced at me but kept walking. I watched as they circled the cul-de-sac, staying carefully on the sidewalk. Once. Twice. They were on the third cycle when I turned to Joanie. "Don't they ever go anywhere else?"

She stuck out her lower lip and shook her head. "Nope. Michael's not allowed. *I'm* not either."

It was odd how they kept circling the cul-de-sac. Just like a carousel. Michael ignored Prince—didn't even seem to know he was trotting behind him. They just walked together. In circles.

Riding home I wondered if Prince ever got upset because Michael never talked to him or even *looked* at him. I'd talk to him—I mean, if he was my dog. I'd make sure he was brushed properly. It's not good to neglect a dog. That's why strays are so skittish and sad-eyed: because they spend so much time alone, wandering.

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Not every day, but most days I'd go to Howley Place and watch them. It was a couple of weeks later when it happened. As usual, Joanie was there. God that girl can talk.

“Callie,” she said, “have you got a dog?”

“No.”

“Me either. But I got a goldfish named Henry. There used to be Henrietta, but she died.”

“Oh?”

“It *might* have been Henry who died. It's kind of hard to tell a boy goldfish from a girl goldfish.”

Michael came out with Prince, then, and they started their route. They'd only gone about twenty yards when I saw something was wrong. Prince began pulling hard against the leash, biting it, tossing his head from side to side. As usual, Michael didn't seem to know. He just kept walking while Prince tugged on the leash, whining, trying to back up. Then I saw what was happening: Prince was raising his leg, trying to pee. But Michael kept walking. And he may have Down's, but he's *strong*. And that little collie can't weigh more than fifteen pounds. Michael was

pulling Prince sideways along the ground and *didn't even know it*. I could see little jets of pee squirting out of Prince as he scrambled on the sidewalk.

I jumped off my bike and ran up to them.

“Michael! Stop. He wants to pee.” Michael pulled up and frowned at me. But then he started walking again. I pushed my palm into his chest. “No. You’ve got to stop. Look.” I grabbed him by the shoulder, but it was like trying to move a block of cement. I finally got him half-turned. “You have to *stop* if Prince wants to pee. Do you understand?” Michael grimaced and pushed back his glasses. Prince had finished his business and was jumping up and barking. Joanie ran over and looked at us with wide eyes. For once, even she didn’t have anything to say.

Suddenly the door to number nine opened and the grey-haired lady was standing there, staring at us. She was wearing a dressing gown and a pair of crazy, fluffy slippers, but she immediately started hobbling down the sidewalk. The closer she got, the grimmer she looked.

“What’s going on?” she said.

The first thing that struck me was how old she looked—old enough to be his grandmother.

“What’s wrong?” she said. “Did Michael fall?”

“No, Mrs. Dillon,” said Joanie. “Prince was trying to pee but Michael wouldn’t let him.”

“What?” She frowned and looked at me.

“He didn’t know,” I said. I tried to explain but she cut me off.

“Why are you hanging around here lately? Did you move in this way?”

“No . . . I just . . .”

“That’s Callie,” said Joanie. “She likes Prince.”

Mrs. Dillon frowned at me again.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Prince wanted to pee, but Michael . . . I thought he was hurting him.”

Mrs. Dillon stepped back and sized me up. “Michael wouldn’t do that. He’s dyin’ to the world about that little dog.”

“Well, it’s just that . . . he didn’t seem to know.”

“He *didn’t*,” said Joanie. “Prince was peeing on himself.”

Michael was staring at me, humming, rocking from foot to foot. Prince leaped up and licked his hand, pulling at the leash.

Mrs. Dillon glanced toward her open door. “I usually let the dog out in the back to do his business. I guess . . . I guess I forgot.”

“I’d better go,” I said.

I got on my bike and pedalled away.

Mrs. Wilkinson may not be my real mother, but she’s still got that mother-daughter radar I’ve heard about. At supper, it only took her a minute to say, “What’s wrong, Callie?” But it was hard to talk about it. I made some excuse about a kid pushing me down the stairs at school. But all the time I was talking, I was staring over her shoulder at that picture of Jesus. Him with his dreamy eyes and dripping heart, and the lambs curled up at his wounded feet, and the doves circling his



thorny head. I wanted to say, *Why did you give that beautiful little dog to a boy like Michael Dillon? He can't take care of him.*

"I'd take care of him."

"What?" said Mrs. Wilkinson. Mr. Wilkinson raised his eyebrow and paused, mid-sip, over his teacup.

It took a second before I realized I'd spoken out loud.

"Nothing," I said.

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It was hard to go back to Howley Place after that. Sometimes I wanted to, but I forced myself to stay away. One day at school I saw Michael sitting at the picnic table. Jackie-Josie must have been sick again, because Peg was with him.

She waved me over. As soon as I sat down Michael started staring at me and humming. Maybe he was finally beginning to recognize me.

"It's Prince," Peg said right away. "Michael's dog is named Prince."

"Yes, I know."

"Oh? How did you find out?"

Well, I just didn't tell her that. I told her everything. Peg didn't say a word, just passed Michael his sandwiches and looked at me the way Sergeant used to.

When I finally shut up Peg glanced at Michael and then smiled at me. “Callie,” she said, “don’t you know what’s really happening on those walks?” The bell rang and she started gathering Michael’s Tupperware.

“What . . .?”

Peg leaned across the table and squeezed my shoulder.

“Think about it,” she said.

I went back to Howley Place one more time. It was a warm evening, and people were lounging on their front steps. I was later than usual, and Michael and Prince were already on their route.

Mrs. Dillon was sitting on her step, smoking, watching them. I rode up and said hello.

“Where have you been?” she said.

“Oh, around.”

“Listen . . . I didn’t mean to give you a hard time the other day. I know you were just lookin’ out for the little dog. Don’t stay away on my account.”

“I won’t.”

“So you like Prince, hey?”

“Yeah. He’s beautiful.”

She nodded and stubbed out her cigarette.

“Mrs. Dillon,” I said, “where did you get Prince?”

She shrugged and her bony shoulders poked through her dressing gown. “Bought him. I thought a dog might be good for Michael—give him some company. But I didn’t know what kind to get. I don’t know too much about dogs: their temperaments and all that. We were a cat crowd, growing up. Anyway, I was looking through a dog book one day: Elsie next door loaned it to me. Michael was watching. And you wouldn’t credit it, but as soon as I turned to the page that showed the little collies, he started pointing at it. And, Sacred Heart, he *wouldn’t* give it up. I was worried he was going to poke a hole in the book.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Did he point at some mongrel I could get for next to nothing? No. It had to be the fancy one. And, well . . . I can’t do too much for Michael. But this one time I figured I’d give him what he wanted.” She shaded her eyes and looked down the road at them. “I know Michael’s not perfect with Prince. But in his own way, he loves that little dog. And Prince likes him too, according to the way he goes mad whenever Michael comes home from school.” She smiled. “You understand?”

But I didn’t. Not completely.

I couldn’t sleep that night—just lay in bed, thinking. My mind was moving in circles just like Michael and Prince. I wondered about the Wilkinsons and why they’d taken me in. Was it just to stay on the good side of Jesus? Was I a stray they were giving a home to? Was Michael a stray? And it struck me that, if he was, maybe with Prince he was a little *less* of a stray—kind of like me with the Wilkinsons. And I suddenly knew what Peg meant: Michael wasn’t taking Prince on those walks; Prince was taking *him*. Maybe the world is not divided up so easily. I remembered

the time at the Hanlons when we buried that poor old grey cat thinking it was Greyun. And Lizzie saying those prayers over him in the dark woods, and how foolish I thought that was. But now I'm not so sure. Maybe we're all strays. Maybe we all need a few prayers. And, if we do, I don't suppose it makes much difference who says them.

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