

NARROW LIVES

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a novel

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Marquette Fiction
Marquette, Michigan

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To Larry and Ann

In little towns, lives roll along so close to one another; loves and hates beat about, their wings almost touching. On the sidewalks along which everybody comes and goes, you must, if you walk abroad at all, at some time pass within a few inches of the man who cheated and betrayed you, or the woman you desire more than anything else in the world. Her skirt brushes against you. You say good-morning and go on. It is a close shave. Out in the world the escapes are not so narrow.”

– Willa Cather, *Lucy Gayheart*

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN *NARROW LIVES*

The Whichgoods and Related Families

Reverend Mordecai Whichgood – Methodist minister, public speaker, abolitionist and temperance proponent. Father of Cecilia Haslett. Deceased at time of novel.

Cecilia Whichgood Haslett – his daughter, now an elderly if not grandmotherly woman

Danielle Haslett – granddaughter of Cecilia Haslett

Gary Marshall – secret lover of Danielle Haslett

The Blackmores and Related Families

Richard Blackmore – deceased father of Lysander Blackmore

Judith Blackmore – deceased wife of Richard Blackmore

Lysander Blackmore – a prosperous banker, around whom this book revolves

Sarah Dalrymple – mother of Theodore Dalrymple

Theodore Dalrymple – illegitimate son of Lysander Blackmore

Lydia Richardson – wife of Lysander Blackmore

Roger Richardson – father of Lydia. He was blamed for the death of Madeleine Henning.

Delia Richardson – wife of Roger and mother of Lydia

Nigel Blackmore – son of Lysander Blackmore and Lydia Richardson

Matilda Blackmore – daughter of Lysander Blackmore and Lydia Richardson

The Robinsons

Annie Robinson – the Blackmores' housekeeper

Vernon Robinson – Annie's son

The Scofields

Mrs. Scofield – mother of Hattie Scofield

Hattie Scofield – best friend of Serena Cumming, Mistress of Lysander Blackmore

Scofield Blackmore – illegitimate son of Lysander Blackmore and Hattie Scofield

The Hopewells

Jessie Hopewell – schoolmate of Scofield Blackmore

Lyla Hopewell – sister of Jessie

The Cummings

Serena Cumming – she learned music on her grandmother, Agnes Henning's piano—the first piano in Marquette

Harry Cumming Jr. – Serena's brother, in prison for selling liquor during Prohibition

The Youngs

Christian Young – a confused young man

Darwin Young – Christian's father, once the best friend of Lysander Blackmore

The Whitmans

Jim Whitman – friend and co-worker of Scofield Blackmore

Ellen Whitman – Jim's sister and Thelma Bergmann's cousin

Other Principal Characters

Leo – Harry Cumming's business partner

Thelma Bergmann – she adopted Jessie when Mrs. Hopewell died

CECILIA

1924

– 1 –

I know she's lying to me. I may be old, but age has given me wisdom. I know what she's up to. I was young once. I know what it's like to be deceived by a man who pretends to love you so he can get what he wants. That girl doesn't fool me; I suspected something the minute I asked whether the letter was from her mother—she got that funny lovesick expression on her face. Then she went upstairs and came back with that other letter. What a clever girl she must think she is to lie to her grandmother. She thinks because I'm old I'm also blind and forgetful, but my bifocals are mighty powerful; I saw how she erased and wrote over the date on that letter from last week; I know I read it before. She can claim all she wants that the letter today was from her mother, but I'll bet anything it's from some young man she doesn't want me to know about.

I'm not surprised she has a young man, a pretty girl like her, and I'm not surprised she lies; she takes after me in that way, but at her age, at least I was a good liar. And if she's got a lover already, I suspect she's inherited more from me than just a deceitful tongue. Look at how ripe her bosom is, and those earrings she wears—just like a Jezebel. She's probably up in her room right now, painting her face, hoping to pick up a college boy this afternoon. She struts like a peacock, encouraging the young men to ogle her from behind. There's so much pride in her. She's just setting herself up for some man to ruin her—so like me at her age.

– 1 –

There's the Richardsons, ten minutes early. I hate when that man honks that horn. I still don't know how any decent Christian can ride in an automobile.

"Danielle, hurry down! The Richardsons are here! We don't want to keep them waiting!"

I wait in the front hall for her. In a minute, she comes downstairs with her face caked in rouge.

"I can't believe you're going to embarrass me by going out like that. What would your mother say?"

"Oh, Grams," she laughs, "I just want to look my best for your friends."

"We're going to a picnic, not a dance hall," I reply. But I'm not surprised she looks like a hussy. Her parents made no effort to rear her properly.

She ignores me as usual and goes out onto the porch. I lock the front door and follow her out to the automobile.

"Hello, Mrs. Haslett," Roger Richardson greets me as I fumble into his contraption.

"Hello," I say, then introduce everyone. "This is my granddaughter, Danielle. Danielle, Mr. and Mrs. Richardson are Mrs. Blackmore's parents."

"I'm sorry we haven't met before," Delia Richardson tells Danielle. "I told Lydia I'd be happy to pick you both up for the picnic so we could get better acquainted. My daughter and son-in-law just don't have room in their vehicle what with the children you know."

Danielle smiles in her sweet, fake way as she sits down. Roger starts up the engine. The contraption makes so much noise we can't talk to each other as we roll through town.

Riding with Roger Richardson is punishment enough for anyone's sins. I start whispering the Lord's Prayer to keep me calm as we nearly run over someone's cat and practically break down trying to cross over the streetcar rails. When we get to Presque Isle Park, I'm surprised Roger doesn't just drive us over a cliff's edge and clear into Lake Superior.

"So what do you think of my little beauty?" Roger asks Danielle as

he brings the vehicle to a stop at the picnic site. “I bet you never had such a smooth ride in your life? Why, it’s as safe as sleeping in your own bed.”

“Roger loves his car more than he loves me,” laughs Delia. “I never thought I would agree to ride in an automobile, but Roger is such a careful driver.”

Lydia Blackmore comes to greet us, saving me from listening to more of Delia’s inane praise for her husband’s driving.

“Hello, Danielle. We’re so glad you came. How are you?”

“Just fine,” Danielle replies.

“Come sit down, dear,” Lydia says, leading Danielle to where the picnic-cloth is laid out on the grass. “It’s been weeks since I’ve seen you. What a charming dress you have on.”

The woman courts my granddaughter more than she does her own parents. Lydia desperately wants to be fashionable; there’s so little fashion here in Marquette, and Danielle has just come up for the summer from Chicago. I follow behind with Delia and Roger to the picnic area.

Then I see him—Lysander, playing among the trees with his children. I watch him for a minute as he tosses a baseball to his little boy. He has so much manly grace; he’s so very tall, and so—

“Mama!” Matilda screams and runs toward us. “Mama! Nigel threw the ball at me real hard. I think it broke my arm.”

She’s crying. At first I’m annoyed because now Lysander is approaching, and I can’t gaze at him anymore without his noticing me, but I also feel bad for little Matilda. I want to scoop her up in my arms, but before she can even get to her mother, Delia has her handkerchief out and is wiping the girls’ eyes while Lydia, scarcely blinking, continues to talk with Danielle about dress patterns.

“I didn’t mean to hit her!” Nigel insists, while his grandmother is too occupied to hear his pleas. “Daddy, tell her I didn’t mean to do it.”

“We know you didn’t, Nigel. It’s okay,” he says, laying his hand on his son’s shoulder to soothe the boy.

Delia manages to calm down Matilda. Roger reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out two hard pieces of candy, one for each of his grandchildren. He’s a nutty old man—for that matter, I remember when

he was a nutty young man—but he’s a good grandfather, and Delia’s a good grandmother. I’d be a good grandmother too if I were allowed, but—well, Danielle won’t show me any affection, and I’m restricted from showing any to my other grandchildren.

“Both of you sit down and behave yourselves,” Lydia scolds her children. “Mind your manners and say hello to Danielle and Mrs. Haslett.”

“Hello, Danielle,” says Nigel. He really is a good little boy, except when he’s around his sister; her presence is too much temptation for his mischievous spirit.

“I don’t like your dress,” Matilda tells Danielle. “I only like gingham dresses, but Mama won’t let me have one.”

“As if I would let my little girl wear something as common as gingham,” Lydia says. “People would think I couldn’t afford decent clothes for you, and then they would think there was something wrong in the banking world, which would only ruin your father’s business.”

“You don’t want a gingham dress, Matilda. They’re much too common,” says Danielle. “What you should want is a lovely pink silk dress from Paris. I have one my father bought me that—”

She’s won over the little girl’s heart. Even Nigel listens to her, enraptured; he’s only eight, but he knows a pretty woman when he sees one. The children pay no attention to me; I’m just an elderly woman, dismissed as some old friend of their Grandfather Blackmore, whom neither remember; they can’t understand why I always show up at these family functions. Neither can the adults, I imagine. Lydia only invites me because she feels I expect it. I know Lysander doesn’t care whether I come. I doubt he even cares what kind of a friendship I actually had with his parents.

“Mrs. Haslett, we brought a chair for you,” he tells me, picking it up and carrying it to where I’m standing. I notice he doesn’t offer one to his mother-in-law. She waits for her husband to bring her one. I suspect Lysander is only polite to me because of the money I have in his bank.

Everyone sits down. Lydia starts unloading her picnic basket. Delia does the same. Delia asks Danielle a question, but Danielle doesn’t

answer. She's staring off into the woods. Lysander sits down beside her. He takes out his pipe and lounges on the grass, trying to be friendly, but Danielle only smirks at him. Then the children start jumping on him. Danielle scarcely notices when Matilda trips over her leg; she seems distracted—must be thinking about that lover of hers again. I wonder whether there's some way I can go find that letter in her room; perhaps she'll go out for a walk later; she has to leave the house at some point; I know she can't stand being around me for long. Then I'll go up there and look in her dresser and find out what boy's been writing her letters. I'm certain her parents sent her to me for the summer to keep her away from some young man; yet neither of them apparently think I know enough about the ways of the world to confide in me.

"I'm so glad we thought to have a picnic," says Delia. "It's such a beautiful day."

"Yes, it is," says Roger.

"Thank you for inviting us," I say. "It's nice to get out of the house and be with young people. I get so bored living alone sometimes."

"But I imagine Danielle's visit has brightened your summer," Delia says.

"Oh, yes, of course," I say; my granddaughter's faults are none of Delia's business. I look over at the little hussy. She's still staring off into the woods, ignoring the company. She's completely lacking in manners; that's her mother's doing. "Danielle's been quite a comfort to me," I add.

The girl doesn't even turn her head to show surprise at my obvious lie.

"Lydia, everything's so delicious," says Delia.

"Thank you," Lydia replies. "It's our new cook's doing. She makes me wonder why I hung on to old Betty so long."

"I don't think I've ever had such a moist apple cake," Delia adds.

"It's very good," I say politely.

Lysander is not interested in cooking. He asks his father-in-law, "So, who do you think will be elected as our next president?"

"Coolidge I hope," says Roger. "I sure don't want any Catholic in the White House."

“The Democrats will never nominate Alfred Smith,” Lysander replies. “I’m sure McAdoo has a better chance, but I don’t think either will stand up against Coolidge.”

“Let’s hope not,” says Roger.

“Will you vote in the election, Mrs. Haslett?” asks Delia.

“I don’t think women should vote,” I say.

“A woman after my own heart,” Lysander replies with a smile.

“Really, Mrs. Haslett?” says Delia. “I would think after all the years women spent fighting for the vote that you would want to exercise your right.”

“God placed man to be over woman,” I reply. “Men should make those decisions.”

“That’s right,” says Lysander. “If it weren’t for women, Harding never would have been elected. You can see what a mistake that was after the Teapot Dome scandal.”

“What do you mean?” asks Delia.

“You women,” Lysander sneers, “only voted for him because he’s good looking.”

Delia’s face flushes with anger. “I vote for the person I feel most qualified to be president.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” says Lysander. “It sounds as if Mrs. Haslett is the only woman we can truly release from the charge of being influenced by Harding’s looks.”

“A comely face,” I state, “brings the sin of pride to the heart. Harding’s pride led to the scandals of his presidency. I would not be surprised if his sudden death were God’s punishment for his sins.”

Lysander whistles and looks up at the sky, as if expecting the clouds to burst forth with fire and lightning. He’s so rebellious. If he only knew what I suffer, and how I would still suffer more for just one hour of truth with him.

“Well,” Delia interjects, ever-opinionated, “I would never let a man tell me how to vote. For that matter, even when others have opposed me, I’ve always followed my own mind, and if I turn out wrong, I live with my mistake rather than blaming someone else for it.”

What is she talking about? For all her protestations for women's rights, I know she worships the ground on which her fool of a husband walks; she never says a word of opposition to him; if she had any courage, she would put a stop to his terrorizing the city with that automobile. I never will figure out what made her marry the man.

"Mrs. Richardson," Danielle finally joins in the conversation, "when did you ever do what you wanted when others opposed you?"

"Well," says Delia, "when I married Roger, our families didn't think we were suited for each other, but we married anyway."

"Mother," Lydia says, "no one wants to hear about that."

Delia looks down, silently chiding herself for her loose tongue. I wish she would tell that story—I'd like to know what made her marry that man.

"I think," Danielle says, "that a woman should always marry the man she loves."

"Danielle, you're too young to know what love is," I reply. "Many girls marry, against their parents' wishes, thinking they are in love, only to regret it. It's the parents' duty to make sure their daughters don't marry young men who are more interested in sowing wild oats than being decent husbands."

"If a girl is truly in love," Danielle replies, "she should marry whomever she wants regardless of what anyone says."

"Danielle, don't be disrespectful to your grandmother; she knows better than you," says Lydia. I'm surprised she comes to my assistance; actually, I'm rather annoyed; I can handle my own granddaughter.

"People who marry for love only deceive themselves," I say. "They confuse love with lust, and once the carnal pleasures pass, they find themselves regretting their decision."

"Please, Mrs. Haslett, the children," says Delia, blushing over "carnal pleasures."

But the children don't seem to be listening. Matilda suddenly drops her cake on her dress, and Lydia cries, "Matilda, look at what you've done!" She takes a napkin and wipes the frosting off her daughter's clothes.

“You pig!” Nigel shouts at his sister.

“That’s enough, Nigel!” his mother scolds.

“Nigel, what did I tell you about calling your sister names?” Lysander says. “I warned you if you didn’t behave today you would get my belt when we got home.”

At this, Nigel bursts into tears, but he’s too proud in front of the company to beg not to get the belt. I’m glad Lysander knows how to keep his children in line. Sometimes I wish I were a man. If Donald had lived to discipline our son John, he would have turned out better, and then probably Danielle as well. If I were younger, and if I had a belt, I’d make sure Danielle didn’t go about all rouged up like the Scarlet Whore of Babylon.

Danielle almost seems to read my thoughts because she looks away from the road for a moment as a vehicle drives up the hill. She seems agitated and drops her glass; it doesn’t break but spills lemonade on the grass.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“No harm done,” says Lydia.

“Mama, can I have another piece of cake?” Matilda asks.

“No, not when you dropped the last piece all over yourself,” says Lydia.

“But Danielle dropped her glass and no one got mad at her,” says Nigel.

“Danielle is a young lady,” Lysander replies. “She dropped her glass accidentally. Matilda was just being careless.”

Danielle stands up and says, “I’m afraid I ate too much. If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go for a little walk.”

“Would you like some company?” asks Lysander.

“No, thank you,” she says. “I’d like to be alone for a little while. The woods seem so quiet and peaceful today.”

“It’s not safe for a young lady to be in the woods by herself,” he replies.

“Lysander,” Lydia frowns, “let the girl be. There’s no danger in the park. I can’t blame her for wanting a little peace and quiet after all your dull talk about politics.”

“I won’t be long; I promise,” says Danielle, quickly walking away. Lysander refers to her as a ‘young lady’ but no young lady would go for a walk without asking her grandmother’s permission. What if I should need her? But she thinks nothing of leaving me here with strangers—well, at least not with people I can consider family. She’s such a selfish girl.

“Have a nice walk, dear,” calls Delia as Danielle starts up the hill and soon disappears into the woods.