

The Chaperone

By Laura Moriarty, author and Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Kansas

Originally Aired 11/1/2020

Laura Moriarty's 2012 novel "The Chaperone" is set in Wichita in 1922. It is about a housewife who has a sudden opportunity to go on an unusual adventure because a local girl needs a chaperone on an adventure of her own. In this section, Cora is in the car with her husband letting him know her thoughts about the trip:

"Alan. Do you know Leonard Brooks?"

She waited for his nod, though she already knew the answer. Alan knew all the other lawyers in town.

"Well," she said, "his eldest daughter got into a dance school in New York. He and his wife would like a married woman to chaperone her. For the month of July, and some of August." She rubbed her lips together. "I think I'll go."

She glanced at him only briefly, seeing his surprise, before she turned back to her window. They were already close to home, moving down the tree-lined streets, past their neighbors' pretty houses and neat lawns. There was much that she would miss while she was away: club meetings and ladies' teas, the summer picnic in the Flint Hills. She would likely miss the birth of a friend's fourth child, which was unfortunate, as she was to be the child's godmother. She would miss her friends, and of course, she would miss Alan. And these familiar streets. But her world would still be here when she returned, and this was her chance to go.

Alan was silent until he pulled in front of the house. When he did speak, his voice was quiet, careful. "When did you decide this?"

"Today." She took off her glove and touched a fingertip to the glass, tracing a raindrop's path. "Don't worry. I'll come back. It's just a little adventure. It's like the twins, going to the farm. I'll be back before they leave for school."

She looked up at the house, lovely even in the rain, though far too big for them. It was a house built—and bought—for a large family, but given the way things turned out, they'd never used the third floor for anything but a playroom, and then for storage. Still, even now that the twins had moved out neither she nor Alan wanted to sell. They both still loved the quiet neighborhood, and they loved the house, how majestic it looked from the street with its wraparound porch and pointed turret. They reasoned that it would be nice for the twins to be able to come home to a familiar place. They'd kept their rooms as the boys had left them, their beds made, their old books on the shelves, the better to lure them home for the summers and holiday breaks.

"New York City?" Alan asked.

She nodded.

“Any reason in particular you want to go there?”

She turned, taking in his warm eyes, his cleft, clean-shaven chin. She had been just a girl when she first saw his face. Nineteen years they had lived together. He knew the particular reason.

“I might do some digging,” she said.

“You’re sure that’s for the best?”

“I can speak with Della in the morning about coming in earlier, or staying later. Or both.” She smiled. “If anything, you’ll gain weight. She’s a far better cook than I am.”

“Cora.” He shook his head. “You know that’s not what I’m asking.”

She turned away, her hand on the door. That was the end of the discussion. She’d made up her mind to go, and as they both understood very well, for them, that was all there was to it.

This transcript of “The Chaperone” is part of the Humanities Kansas Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.