



Background Eleanora E. Tate was born in Canton, Missouri, and spent her first year of school in a one-room schoolhouse for students in the first through eighth grades. She wrote her first story when she was in the third grade. Tate says she writes books and stories so that all people can read about the proud history and culture of African Americans.

Big Things Come in Small Packages

Short Story by Eleanora E. Tate

CLOSE READ
Notes

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–77, begin to collect and cite text evidence.
 - Underline details in lines 1–5 that describe the story's setting.
 - Circle several events that depend on the setting.
 - Circle the narrator's name and underline three things she reveals about herself and Tucker.

I want to tell you about a boy I knew who lived in Morehead City, North Carolina, some years ago named Tucker Willis. He lived by Calico Creek where it narrows down to marsh grass, flounder, and fiddler crabs. It's not far from the back side of the Morehead City Port **Terminal**, where the big ships come in from the Atlantic Ocean.

terminal:

Everybody liked him, and he was good at almost everything he put his hand to. But when Tucker turned eleven or twelve, he was still so short he looked like an elf. And you know how it is when you're a little different from other folks in even some harmless kind of way.

10 Kids called him Tom Thumb, squirt, midget, inchworm, dwarf.

I thought Tucker was the cutest little thing in the world. But to him back then I was ole knock-kneed LaShana Mae, the girl who lived down the street. I was a couple years younger than him. We were friends, though, and went to the same church—St. Luke's Missionary Baptist—and the same school.

Back in those days, in the 1970s, young boys and girls didn't hang out as boyfriend and girlfriend like kids do now. Plus, I was just a skinny girl with braids and braces. Kids called me Wires because of those braces, and boy, did it ever make me mad! So Tucker and I had a
20 lot in common, and lots of times we talked about the things kids called us, especially when we went fishing.

Even though being called those names hurt, Tucker gave up fighting the kids who said them. Fighting didn't help. The name-callers were all too big for him to beat up. So after a while, he learned to ignore the teasing. Most times he laughed it off. He was a tough little dude. But oh mercy, how he hated those names!

One day Tucker did something that made everybody stop calling him names he didn't like. I think it helped him grow a few inches, too.

You need to know a few things about this boy before I tell you
30 what changed things around. Tucker could do almost anything that any other kid his age could do. He was a hotshot shortstop on the Little League baseball team. He could jump like a flea on the basketball court. He was smart in school. He was in the Boy Scouts. He could swim like a fish—and even surf!

He looked like a Tootsie Roll to me in that big ocean. Yeah, I had a name for him, too. I called him Tootsie Roll, but never to his face. I just kept it to myself. And when I called him that in my head, I didn't mean it in a bad way.

40 pier: Tucker could do some fishing. He especially liked to fish his folks' little pier alongside their house. In the summertime he'd lie on his stomach on the pier and catch some of the biggest flounder to come out of Calico Creek. Instead of a rod and reel, he used a handful of fishing line, a hook baited with shrimp, and a sinker to keep the bait from floating on the surface.

He'd dangle that shrimp an inch or two off the bottom, right in front of a flounder's nose. Sometimes we'd fish together on his pier, and I wouldn't catch diddlysquat, not even a pinfish, not even a lizard fish, nothing. But ole Tootsie Roll could catch 'em.

50 I tried fishing the way he did, but most of the time I used a rod and reel 'cause I thought the way Tucker did it was country. I still couldn't catch anything, not in Calico Creek. I did all right when I fished at the pier in Atlantic Beach.

That's how I'd see Tucker surfing. He even got teased about surfing, because not many black kids we knew surfed. Shoot, as much as we all loved the water, not a whole lot of us even knew how to swim. I didn't. Not until Tucker taught me later on.

He and his dad or mom would fish out on their own little pier all night sometimes with a Coleman lantern¹ for light. His folks used regular rods and reels. I never fished out there at night with them
60 because the mosquitoes and the gnats would about eat me up.

Plus, my momma liked to tell me that they used to do baptizing in that creek, which was okay. But then Momma'd say, "LaShana Mae, you watch out about being around that creek by yourself at night. The people who got baptized there and who've passed on come back to that creek as spirits in the middle of the night when the moon's full. They'll be singing and celebrating and shouting and praising, and they don't want to be **disturbed**. Unless you wanna join in with 'em."

disturbed:

Me being a scared little kid, you can believe that Momma didn't have to worry about me going out to *nobody's* Calico Creek by myself
70 at night. But sometimes I'd go to my window at night and look out to see if anybody was celebrating the way she said. All I ever saw were grown folks fishing. Sometimes somebody would holler when they caught a big one. After I got grown I understood that Momma told me that story to try to help me stay out of trouble. She was worried I'd drown or get into some kind of foolishness. Well, it worked. I knew that it was easy to get into trouble when you're out someplace where you're not supposed to be.

¹ **Coleman lantern:** a lamp that burns pressurized kerosene to give light.

2. **REREAD** Reread lines 6–26. In the margin, describe the conflict Tucker faces. Circle the text that foreshadows a future event.
3. **READ** As you read lines 78–116, continue to cite textual evidence.
 - Circle text that creates suspense about a major event in the plot that will take place.
 - Underline text that suggests that his meeting with Richard was important to Tucker.
 - In the margin, make an inference about Tucker's attitude toward Richard.

Anyway, what happened to change all the name-calling started when Tucker was on his pier trying to catch a flounder. He noticed a
80 man standing on the Moten Motel dock just a few yards from him. The man had a thick white mustache and Vandyke beard and wore a blue-and-gold military-style jacket and cap. I wasn't there, so I didn't see him, but that's what Tucker told me.

When the man waved, Tucker, being a friendly kind of kid, waved back. They struck up a conversation. The man said his name was Richard and that he was staying at the motel for a few days. His home was in Manteo, on Roanoke Island, not far from the Outer Banks, where he worked with the U.S. Lifesaving Service.

Tucker figured what he meant was that he was with the U.S. Coast
90 Guard. Tucker was pretty knowledgeable about the coast guard, but he had never heard of this lifesaving service. Tucker asked the man if he liked to fish. Richard said yes. He'd been a commercial fisherman before he became a captain in the lifesaving service. As a lifesaver, he said, he and his men went into the ocean in the middle of hurricanes and nor'easters² to save passengers and crew members whose ships were sinking.

Of course, anything about water fascinated Tucker, so he must have asked this Richard a million questions. Richard didn't seem to mind, though. He said he didn't get to talk to kids much anymore.

100 Richard said a good crewman had to be strong, an excellent swimmer, a quick thinker, and in good physical health, have good eyesight, and understand how dangerous the sea can be. He told so many stories about lifesaving that Tucker wished he could enlist right away, and said so. He had the right **qualifications**—other than being too young, of course. And too short.

qualifications:

Richard told him it wasn't the size of a person that got the job done. It was how bad the person wanted to do it. How were those huge ships two and more stories high able to move into the Morehead City port and back out to sea? Most couldn't do it without little
110 tugboats pushing and pulling them in, Richard said. A tugboat could bring in a ship many times its size.

Richard said that Tucker would make a good tugboat and one day might even grow to be a big ship. He thanked Tucker for the conversation, said maybe they'd meet again, and then the man

² **nor'easters:** storms with winds blowing from the northeast.

wandered off back toward the motel. Tucker said for the rest of the afternoon, he thought over what Richard had said.

120 A few days later, Tucker decided to go with his dad to the Atlantic Beach pier to fish. His daddy worked there as a cook. For some reason I couldn't go that day. I've always wished I had. Tucker said he took his surfboard too, in case fishing got slow. It was early morning, but a hot July wind blew in from the southwest, making the waves choppy and sandy. The tide was going out. Hardly anybody was on the pier, which was another hint that the fish might not be biting. Tucker said only one guy was in the water, floating on a red raft like a huge jellyfish.

130 After a good hour had passed and he hadn't got a bite, Tucker left his rod and reel with his father in the pier restaurant's kitchen and went surfing. After he swam out far enough, he climbed onto his surfboard and rode a wave in. When he glanced back at the pier, guess who he saw? His new friend, Richard, on the pier, clapping for him. At least this time he had on shorts and a regular shirt. Tucker said he bet Richard had about burnt up in that heavy uniform the other day.

Richard hollered, "Do it, Tugboat! Pull that ole wave in!"

Tugboat? Tucker said he frowned until he remembered Richard's story about tugboats. So he waved back and swam out to pull in another one, passing the man on the raft. The man said, "You're

4. **REREAD** Reread lines 100–116. Explain the significance of Richard's statement that "Tucker would make a good tugboat and one day might even grow to be a big ship." Cite specific text evidence to support your explanation.

5. **READ** As you read lines 117–183, continue to cite textual evidence.

- In the margin, take notes about how suspense is built in this section.
- Circle the paragraph that is most likely the story's climax.

The reporter's story about Tucker's rescue was in the local paper, then got picked up by the Associated Press and went all over the world. CBS TV even flew him and his folks to New York to be on its morning show. Afterwards, back home in Morehead City, strangers stopped Tucker on the street, in stores, even came to his home. They wanted to see the little "tugboat" that hauled in that big man, and get his autograph.

Businesses up and down Arendell Street put up WELCOME HOME, TUGBOAT! posters in their windows. And there was a
200 parade. Tucker was a hero! He and the mayor rode on the back of a big ole white Cadillac convertible and waved at everybody. I was so proud that I almost forgot and hollered out, "Way to go, Tootsie Roll!" but I caught myself in time.

Everybody—even local folks—called Tucker Tugboat after that, including us kids. We'd never seen a real live hero close up before, especially one our age. It wasn't cool anymore to tease him with those other names. Funny how things can turn right around, isn't it?

And you know what? Tucker grew to be six feet five. He played on the North Carolina Central University Eagles basketball team, joined
210 the U.S. Coast Guard, and lives in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, on the Outer Banks.

But there's something Tucker never figured out. When he first told people that Richard was the real hero, nobody believed him. Apparently nobody but Tucker had seen Richard—not even Mr. Nibbles.

There's more. When Tucker went into the pier gift shop to spend some of his rescue money, he picked up a book about the coast guard. He was thumbing through it when he stopped at an old-timey picture of some black men wearing jackets like Richard's. They were standing
220 in front of a building on the Outer Banks. Below it was a picture of—yes, Richard! Mustache, beard, jacket, everything!

Tucker read, "History of the Pea Island Lifesaving Service. Captain Richard Etheridge was Keeper of the Pea Island Lifesaving Service, a forerunner of part of what is now the U.S. Coast Guard. This unique, all African American, courageous lifesaving crew, and those who followed, saved hundreds of shipwrecked passengers' lives by plunging into the stormy seas and bringing their charges back to safety."

260 *There really was a man named Richard Etheridge, a professional fisherman who was born in 1844 on Roanoke Island off North Carolina. A member of the Thirty-sixth U.S. Colored Troops of the Union Army, he fought at the Battle of New Market Heights in Virginia during the Civil War. And in 1880, Etheridge was hired as the Keeper of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station on the Barrier Islands (the Outer Banks) of North Carolina. The station continued to set a high standard of performance with its all-black personnel until 1947, when the Coast Guard closed down the facilities.*

270 *No one made any formal recognition of the Pea Island surfmen's daring sea rescues until 1996. In March of that year, Etheridge and his men were finally acknowledged **posthumously** in formal ceremonies in Washington, D.C., with a Gold Lifesaving Medal from the United States Coast Guard. Etheridge and his wife and daughter are buried on the grounds of the North Carolina Aquarium in Manteo, which maintains an exhibit on these brave men.*

posthumously:

9. ◀ **REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 260–275. With a partner, discuss the inclusion of the historical facts at the end of a fictional story. Does it add anything to the story or is it unnecessary?

SHORT RESPONSE

Cite Text Evidence Was Tucker the hero that everyone thought him to be, or was Richard mostly responsible for the rescue? **Cite text evidence** to support your opinion.

Tucker said he shot out of that gift shop toward the restaurant to
230 show his dad the book to prove his case, but what he read next made
him stop: “Captain Etheridge, born in 1844 on Roanoke Island in
North Carolina, died in 1900.”

Tucker said he read that date fifteen or twenty times before it
started to sink in. Nineteen hundred? Richard Etheridge had been
dead for almost one hundred years. How was it possible a dead man
helped him save that guy? Unless Richard was a ghost. He’d been
talking to, and swimming with—a ghost?

You can believe Tucker hit up the library that very next day and
searched for as much information as he could find on Richard
240 Etheridge. There wasn’t much, but what he read was that Richard
Etheridge was all those great things he had read about and that he still
died in 1900.

A few years later, when Tucker’s folks visited the North Carolina
Aquarium on Roanoke Island, Tucker found Richard Etheridge’s
grave and monument. Etheridge’s headstone was marked 1844–1900.
That’s when Tucker stopped talking about Richard being involved in
the rescue. Unless somebody asked.

So now, if you run into Tucker “Tugboat” Willis, ask him about
the rescue, and he’ll tell you. Then, real carefully, ask if he ever met
250 Richard Etheridge. He’ll tell you yes, he did, and what he learned.
What he learned was that it pays to be polite to everybody you meet,
like Tucker was to a man named Richard. You never know when that
person might help you.

And every time Tucker tells me the story, he tells it to me the same
way I told it to you. Seeing how Tucker turned out proves that some
mighty things that help folks out in some mighty big ways can come
in some mighty small packages.

It also proves that good things come to those who wait, like I did.
I know, because I’m Mrs. LaShana Mae Willis, Tugboat’s wife.

8. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 238–275, continue to cite textual
evidence.

- Underline the reason Tucker stops talking about Richard’s involvement in the rescue (lines 243–247).
- Circle what you learn about the narrator.