

LADDER OF YEARS

ANNE TYLER



BALLANTINE BOOKS

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“*Ladder of Years* has charm galore. ... Tyler does a lovely job painting Delia’s entry into her new world.”

—*Newsweek*

“For the sheer delight of reading wonderful English prose, Anne Tyler has few, if any, peers. Her characters possess quirks that intrigue the reader without overshadowing their essential humanness.”

—*USA Today*

“The French have said that William Wyler, the great director of movies like *Dodsworth* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, had a *style sans style*. Anne Tyler has this same deceptive ‘style without a style.’ ... She does nothing fancy, nothing tricky. But so rigorous and artful is the style without style, so measured and delicate is each observation, so complex is the structure and so astute and open the language, that the reader can relax, feel secure in the narrative, and experience the work as something real and natural — even inevitable. In *Ladder of Years*, the story that appears to unfold of its own accord is a fairy tale of sorts, a fairy tale with echoes of both the tragedy of ‘King Lear’ and the absurdity of the modern romance novel.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“*Ladder of Years* is the story of a fugue to change one’s life. It is told in Tyler’s characteristic manner, one that no other American writer approaches. Just as she subverts the domestic with fantasy — her situations are earthbound until you notice that they are gliding along two inches above the earth — she subverts fantasy with the domestic.”

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Universal street-penny poignance is what gives Tyler’s fiction its emotional weight as well as its sheen.”

—*The Boston Sunday Globe*

“Exhilarating ... *Ladder of Years* is not just a novel of middle age; learning how to say goodbye, how to find another path to the harmony one needs to discover are tasks even the young face.”

—*The Dallas Morning News*

“HAUNTING, MELANCHOLY ...

The characters feel so real that we find ourselves thinking about them, worrying if they made the right choices, long after we’ve read about them. ... [Tyler] artfully illuminates the complexity burrowing beneath the surface of ordinary lives as people fight off despair and loneliness with ferocious, if misguided, tenacity.”

—*The Miami Herald*

“Well worth reading ... *Ladder of Years* is not about the life of one woman; it is about the American tendency to idealize the traditional family of the ’50s, when men ruled the roost and women were expected to be submissive.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Tyler mixes some bitter with the sweet ... When the sheer dailiness of ordinary life seems terminally humdrum, who has not entertained the fantasy? Just cut and run ... That relatively few people actually follow up on this impulse may testify to the power of inertia or the naggings of conscience, or to some tedious combination of both. Thanks to the magic of Anne Tyler’s fiction, Delia Grinstead, the heroine of *Ladder of Years*, is largely freed from such constraints.”

—*Time*

“What is perhaps most fascinating is that Tyler has the grace and skill to involve readers so deeply that they want to fight with the characters. This is a writer who knows, above all, how to draw people so real that you can’t help but care what becomes of them.”

—*St. Petersburg Times*

“Tyler continues to delight readers with a cast of lovable misfits and elegant, but accessible prose. ... She makes mealtime spats and pre-wedding jitters as riveting and vivid as Hollywood car chases.”

—*New York Daily News*

“*Ladder of Years* is tough to resist.”

—*Detroit Free Press*

“POIGNANT, WARM, AND QUIRKY ...

Perhaps no one writing fiction today can so clearly evoke middle-age angst as Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Tyler.”

—*Library Journal*

“[A] pastel emotional journey of self-discovery ... It unfolds so gracefully that its characters seem to blossom and grow almost imperceptibly until they have fully engaged our interest, our sympathy, and our understanding. ... [A] poignant, quiet tale.”

—*The State* (Columbia, SC)

“Tyler’s penchant for orchestrating hordes of quirky personalities, her facility with digressive but relevant subplots are hallmarks of all her books.”

—*The News & Observer* (North Carolina)

“One of the satisfactions of this novel is Tyler’s evocation of typical family life. ... [She] engages our sympathy and growing respect for a character who finally realizes that ‘the ladder of years’ is a time trip to the future.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

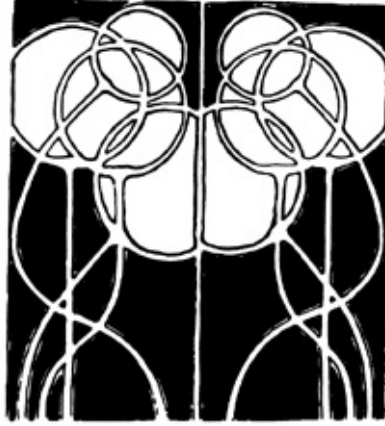
“[A] charming, often hilarious, and astute novel ... Tyler is in top form here. Her seemingly effortless prose is, like silk, rich in subtle hues and sheeny with dancing light. ... [She] offers keen and provocative insights into the cycles of family life, shifting emotional needs, and the process of aging.”

—*Booklist* (boxed review)

“Another agreeably offbeat journey back to Tyler country, where the characters who will fill the big, slightly dowdy, old houses are spellbound by their own homely lives, their routines, their family stories, their recipes for mint pea soup — until something happens to break the spell. ... All of Tyler’s trademarks are here: comedy, the sweet, blunt edges of romance, and characters so perfectly, aching drawn you can never decide whether they’re the most oddball or most everyday people you’ve ever come across.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

LADDER
OF YEARS



ANNE TYLER

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

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A Reader's Guide

Excerpt from The Beginner's Goodbye

BALTIMORE WOMAN DISAPPEARS DURING FAMILY VACATION

Delaware State Police announced early today that Cordelia F. Grinstead, 40, wife of a Roland Park physician, has been reported missing while on holiday with her family in Bethany Beach.

Mrs. Grinstead was last seen around noon this past Monday, walking south along the stretch of sand between Bethany and Sea Colony.

Witnesses of her departure—her husband, Dr. Samuel Grinstead, 55, and her three children, Susan, 21, Ramsay, 19, and Carroll, 15—were unable to recall any suspicious characters in the vicinity. They reported that to the best of their recollection she simply strolled away. Her failure to return was not remarked until late afternoon.

A slender, small-boned woman with curly fair or light-brown hair, Mrs. Grinstead stands 5'2" or possibly 5'5" and weighs either 90 or 110 pounds. Her eyes are blue or gray or perhaps green, and her nose is mildly sunburned in addition to being freckled.

Presumably she was carrying a large straw tote trimmed with a pink bow, but family members could not agree upon her clothing. In all probability it was something pink or blue, her husband suggested, either frilled or lacy or "looking kind of baby-doll."

Authorities do not suspect drowning, since Mrs. Grinstead avoided swimming whenever possible and professed a distinct aversion to water. In fact, her sister, Eliza Felson, 52, has alleged to reporters that the missing woman "may have been a cat in her most recent incarnation."

Anyone with knowledge of Mrs. Grinstead's whereabouts is urged to contact the Delaware State Police at once.

This all started on a Saturday morning in May, one of those warm spring days that smell like clean linen. Delia had gone to the supermarket to shop for the week's meals. She was standing in the produce section, languidly choosing a bunch of celery. Grocery stores always made her reflective. Why was it, she was wondering, that celery was not called "corduroy plant"? That would be much more colorful. And garlic bulbs should be "moneybags," because their shape reminded her of the sacks of gold coins in folktales.

A customer on her right was sorting through the green onions. It was early enough so the store was nearly empty, and yet this person seemed to be edging in on her a bit. Once or twice the fabric of his shirt sleeve brushed her dress sleeve. Also, he was really no more than stirring those onions around. He would lift one rubber-banded clump and then drop it and alight on another. His fingers were very long and agile, almost spidery. His cuffs were yellow oxford cloth.

He said, "Would you know if these are called scallions?"

"Well, sometimes," Delia said. She seized the nearest bunch of celery and stepped toward the plastic bags.

"Or would they be shallots?"

"No, they're scallions," she told him.

Needlessly, he steadied the roll of bags overhead while she peeled one off. (He towered a good foot above her.) She dropped the celery into the bag and reached toward the cup of twist ties, but he had already plucked one out for her. "What are shallots, anyway?" he asked.

She would have feared that he was trying to pick her up, except that when she turned she saw he was surely ten years her junior, and very good-looking besides. He had straight, dark yellow hair and milky blue eyes that made him seem dreamy and peaceful. He was smiling down at her, standing a little closer than strangers ordinarily stand.

"Um ...," she said, flustered.

"Shallots," he reminded her.

"Shallots are fatter," she said. She set the celery in her grocery cart. "I believe they're above the parsley," she called over her shoulder, but she found him next to her, keeping step with her as she wheeled her cart toward the citrus fruits. He wore blue jeans, very faded, and soft moccasins that couldn't be heard above "King of the Road" on the public sound system.

"I also need lemons," he told her.

She slid another glance at him.

"Look," he said suddenly. He lowered his voice. "Could I ask you a big favor?"

"Um ..."

"My ex-wife is up ahead in potatoes. Or not ex I guess but ... estranged, let's say, and she

got her boyfriend with her. Could you just pretend we're together? Just till I can duck out here?"

"Well, of course," Delia said.

And without even taking a deep breath first, she plunged happily back into the old high school atmosphere of romantic intrigue and deception. She narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin and said, "We'll show *her!*" and sailed past the fruits and made a U-turn into root vegetables. "Which one is she?" she murmured through ventriloquist lips.

"Tan shirt," he whispered. Then he startled her with a sudden burst of laughter. "Ha, ha," he told her too loudly. "Aren't you clever to say so!"

But "tan shirt" was nowhere near an adequate description. The woman who turned at the sound of his voice wore an ecru raw-silk tunic over black silk trousers as slim as two pencils. Her hair was absolutely black, cut shorter on one side, and her face was a perfect oval. "Who's Adrian," she said. Whoever was with her—some man or other—turned too, still gripping the potato. A dark, thick man with rough skin like stucco and eyebrows that met in the middle. Not up to the woman's standard at all; but how many people were?

Delia's companion said, "Rosemary. I didn't see you. So don't forget," he told Delia, not breaking his stride. He set a hand on her cart to steer it into aisle 3. "You promised me you'll make your marvelous blancmange tonight."

"Oh, yes, my ... blancmange," Delia echoed faintly. Whatever blancmange might be, it sounded the way she felt just then: pale and plain-faced and skinny, with her freckles and her frizzy brown curls and her ruffled pink round-collared dress.

They had bypassed the dairy case and the juice aisle, where Delia had planned to pick up several items, but she didn't point that out because this Adrian person was still talking. "You'll want your blancmange and then your, uh, what, your meat and vegetables and da-da-da ..."

The way he let his voice die reminded her of those popular songs that end with the singer just absentmindedly drifting away from the microphone. "Is she looking at us?" he whispered. "Check it out. Don't make it obvious."

Delia glanced over, pretending to be struck by a display of converted rice. Both the woman and the boyfriend had their backs to her, but there was something artificial in their posture. No one could find russet potatoes so mesmerizing. "Well, she's *mentally* looking," Delia murmured. She turned to see her grocery cart rapidly filling with pasta. Egg noodles, rotini, linguine—Adrian flung in boxes at random. "Excuse me ...," she said.

"Oh, sorry," he told her. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and loped off. Delia followed, pushing her cart very slowly in case he meant for them to separate now. But at the end of the aisle, he paused and considered a row of tinned ravioli until she caught up with him. "The boyfriend's name is Skipper," he said. "He's her accountant."

"Accountant!" Delia said. He didn't fit the image.

"Half a dozen times, at least, he's come to our house. Sat in our actual living room, going over her taxes. Rosemary owns this catering firm. The Guilty Party, it's called. Ha. 'Sinful & Delicious Foods for Every Occasion.' Then next thing I know, she's moved in with him. She claimed she only needed a few weeks by herself, but when she phoned to say so, I could hear

him coaching her in the background.”

“Oh, that’s terrible,” Delia said.

A woman with a baby in her cart reached between them for a can of macaroni and cheese. Delia stepped back to give her room.

“If it’s not too much trouble,” Adrian said when the woman had moved away, “I’ll just tag along while you finish your shopping. It would look sort of fishy if I left right now, all alone. I hope you don’t mind.”

Mind? This was the most interesting thing that had happened to her in years. “Not a bit,” she told him. She wheeled her cart into aisle 4. Adrian strolled alongside her.

“I’m Adrian Bly-Brice, by the way,” he said. “I guess I ought to know *your* name.”

“I’m Delia Grinstead,” she told him. She plucked a bottle of mint flakes from the spice rack.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever run into a Delia before.”

“Well, it’s Cordelia, really. My father named me that.”

“And are you one?”

“Am I one what?”

“Are you your father’s Cordelia?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “He’s dead.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“He died this past winter,” she said.

Ridiculously, tears filled her eyes. This whole conversation had taken a wrong turn somewhere. She squared her shoulders and pushed her cart on down the aisle, veering around an elderly couple conferring over salt substitutes. “Anyhow,” she said, “it got shortened to Delia right away. Like in the song.”

“What song?”

“Oh, the ... you know, the one about Delia’s gone, one more round ... My father used to sing me to sleep with that.”

“I never heard it,” Adrian said.

The tune on the loudspeaker now was “By the Time I Get to Phoenix,” competing with his father’s gruff voice muttering “Delia’s Gone” in her mind. “Anyhow!” she said again, more brightly.

They started up the next aisle: cereals on the left, popcorn and sweets on the right. Delia needed cornflakes, but cornflakes were such a *family* item, she decided against them. (Which ingredients were required for blancmange?) Adrian gazed idly at sacks of butterscotch drops and rum balls. His skin had that slight tawnyness that you occasionally see in fair-haired men and it seemed almost without texture. He must not have to shave more than two or three times a week.

“I myself was named for an uncle,” he said. “Rich Uncle Adrian Brice. Probably all for nothing, though. He’s mad I changed my name when I married.”

“You changed your name when you married?”

“I used to be Adrian Brice the Second, but then I married Rosemary Bly and we both became Bly-Brice.”

“Oh, so there’s a hyphen,” Delia said. She hadn’t realized.

“It was entirely her idea, believe me.”

As if summoned up by his words, Rosemary appeared at the other end of the aisle. She tossed something into the red plastic tote basket hanging from Skipper’s fist. Women like Rosemary never purchased their groceries by the cartload.

“If we went to the movie, though, we’d miss the concert,” Adrian said instantly, “and you know how I’ve looked forward to the concert.”

“I forgot,” Delia said. “The concert! They’ll be playing ...”

But she couldn’t think of a single composer. (And maybe he had meant some other kind of concert—a rock show, for instance. He was young enough.) Rosemary watched without a flicker of expression as Delia and Adrian approached. Delia was the first to lower her eyes. “We’ll just save the movie for tomorrow,” Adrian was saying. He guided her cart to the left a bit. All at once Delia felt woefully small—not dainty and petite, but squat, humble, insignificant. She didn’t stand much taller than Adrian’s armpit. She increased her speed, anxious to leave this image of herself behind. “They do have a Sunday matinee, don’t they?” Adrian was asking.

“Of course they do,” she told him, a little too emphatically. “We could go to the two o’clock showing, right after our champagne brunch.”

By now she was tearing down the next aisle. Adrian had to lengthen his stride to keep up. They narrowly missed hitting a man whose cart was stacked with gigantic Pampers boxes.

In aisle 7 they zipped through the gourmet section—anchovy paste, smoked oysters—and arrived at baby foods, where Delia collected herself enough to remember she needed strained spinach. She slowed to study the rows of little jars. “Not those!” Adrian hissed. They raced on, leaving behind aisle 7 and careening into 8. “Sorry,” he said. “I just thought if Rosemary saw you buying baby food ...”

If she saw her buying baby food, she’d think Delia was just a housewife with an infant waiting at home. Ironically, though, Delia had long passed the infant stage. To suspect her of having a child that young was to flatter her. All she needed the spinach for was her mint pea soup. But she didn’t bother explaining that and instead selected a can of chicken broth. “Oh,” Adrian said, traveling past her, “consommé! I meant to buy some.”

He dropped a tin in her cart—a fancy brand with a sleek white label. Then he wandered on, hands jammed flat in his rear pockets. Come to think of it, he reminded Delia of her first real boyfriend—in fact, her only boyfriend, not counting her husband. Will Britt had possessed this same angularity, which had seemed graceful at some moments and ungainly at others; and he had cocked his elbows behind him in just this way, like knobby, sharp wings, and his ears had stuck out a bit too. It was a relief to find that Adrian’s ears stuck out. She distrusted men who were too handsome.

At the end of the aisle they looked in both directions. No telling where Rosemary might pop up next, with that carefree, untrammelled tote basket. But the coast was clear, and Delia

nosed her cart toward paper goods. “What,” Adrian said, “you want to buy *more*?”

Yes, she did. She had barely passed the halfway mark. But she saw his point. The longer they hung around, the greater his chances of another confrontation. “We’ll leave,” she decided. She started for the nearest checkout counter, but Adrian, lacing his fingers through the grid of the cart, drew it toward the express lanes. “One, two, three ...” She counted her purchases aloud. “We can’t go there! I’ve got sixteen, seventeen ...”

He pulled the cart into the fifteen-item lane, behind an old woman buying nothing but a sack of dog chow. He started dumping noodle boxes onto the counter. Ah, well. Delia rummaged through her bag for her checkbook. The old woman in front of them, meanwhile, was depositing bits of small change in the cashier’s palm. She handed over a penny and then, after a search, another penny. A third penny had a piece of lint stuck to it, and she plucked that away painstakingly. Adrian gave an exasperated sigh. “I forgot cat food,” Delia told him. She hadn’t a hope in this world that he would volunteer to go back for it; she just thought the flow of talk might settle him down some. “Seeing that dog chow reminded me, we’re almost out,” she said. “Oh, never mind. I’ll send Ramsay for it later.”

The old woman was hunting a fourth penny. She was positive, she said, that she had another one somewhere.

“Ramsay!” Adrian repeated to himself. He sighed again—or no, this time he was laughing. “I bet you live in Roland Park,” he told Delia.

“Well, yes, I do.”

“I knew it! Everybody in Roland Park has a last name for a first name.”

“So?” she said, stung. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“It isn’t even true,” she said. “Why, I know lots of people who—”

“Don’t take offense! I live in Roland Park myself,” he said. “It’s just pure luck I wasn’t named ... oh, Bennington, or McKinney; McKinney was my mother’s maiden name. I bet your *husband’s* mother’s ... and if we decide against the blancmange tonight we can always have it tomorrow night, don’t you think?”

She felt dislocated for a second, until she understood that Rosemary must be in earshot again. Sure enough: a tote basket, still loaded, arrived on the counter behind her own groceries. By now the old woman had moved away, tottering under her burden of dog chow, and the cashier was asking them, “Plastic bags, or paper?”

“Plastic, please,” Adrian said.

Delia opened her mouth to object (she generally chose paper, herself), but she didn’t want to contradict Adrian in front of his wife.

Adrian said, “Delia, I don’t believe you’ve met my ...”

Delia turned around, already plastering a pleasantly surprised smile on her face.

“My, ah, Rosemary,” Adrian said, “and her, ah, Skipper. This is Delia Grinstead.”

Rosemary wasn’t smiling at all, which made Delia feel foolish, but Skipper gave her a friendly nod. He kept his arms folded across his chest—short, muscular arms, heavily furred

bulging from the sleeves of his polo shirt. “Any relation to Dr. Grinstead?” he asked her.

“Yes! He’s my ... he was my ... he’s my husband,” she said. How to explain the existence of a husband, in the present situation?

But Skipper seemed to take this in stride. He told Rosemary, “Dr. Grinstead’s my mother’s GP. Been treating her forever. Right?” he asked Delia.

“Right,” she agreed, not having the faintest idea. Rosemary, meanwhile, went on studying her coolly. She carried her head at a deliberate tilt, accentuating the asymmetrical hairdo with its dramatic downward slant toward her chin. It was none of Delia’s business, of course, but privately she thought Adrian deserved somebody more likable. She thought even Skipper deserved somebody more likable. She wished she had worn high heels this morning, and a dressier dress.

“Dr. Grinstead is just about the last man in Baltimore who makes house calls,” Skipper was telling Rosemary.

“Well, only if it’s absolutely essential,” Delia said. A reflex: she never gave up trying to protect her husband from his patients.

Behind her, the scanner said *peep ... peep ... peep*, registering her groceries. The music had stopped playing several minutes back, as Delia just now noticed, and the murmuring of shoppers elsewhere in the store sounded hushed and ominous.

“That’ll be thirty-three forty,” the cashier announced.

Delia turned to fill in her check and found Adrian handing over the money. “Oh!” she said, preparing to argue. But then she grew conscious of Rosemary listening.

Adrian flashed her a wide, sweet smile and accepted his change. “Good seeing you,” he told the other couple. He walked on out, pushing the cart, with Delia trailing behind.

It had been raining off and on for days, but this morning had dawned clear and the parking lot had a rinsed, fresh, soft look under a film of lemony sunlight. Adrian halted the cart at the curb and lifted out two of the grocery bags, leaving the third for Delia. Next came the problem of whose car to head for. He was already starting toward his own, which was evidently parked somewhere near the dry cleaner’s, when she stopped him. “Wait,” she said. “I’m right here.”

“But what if they see us? We can’t leave in two different cars!”

“Well, I do have a *life* to get back to,” Delia snapped. This whole business had gone far enough, it occurred to her. She was missing her baby-food spinach and her cornflakes and untold other items on account of a total stranger. She flung open the trunk of her Plymouth.

“Oh, all right,” Adrian said. “What we’ll do is load these groceries very, very slowly, and by that time they’ll have driven away. They didn’t have so much to ring up: two steaks, two potatoes, a head of lettuce, and a box of after-dinner mints. That won’t take long.”

Delia was astonished at his powers of observation. She watched him arrange his bags in her trunk, after which he consumed a good half minute repositioning a small box of something Orzo, it was—a most peculiar, tiny-sized pasta that she’d often noticed on the shelf but never bought. She had thought it resembled rice, in which case why not serve rice instead, which was surely more nutritious? She handed him the bag she was holding, and he settled that with

elaborate care between the first two. "Are they coming out yet?" he asked.

"No," she said, looking past him toward the store. "Listen, I owe you some money."

"My treat."

"No, really, I have to pay you back. Only I planned to write a check and I don't have any cash. Would you accept a check? I could show you my driver's license," she said.

He laughed.

"I'm serious," she told him. "If you don't mind taking a—"

Then she caught sight of Skipper and Rosemary emerging from the supermarket. Skipper hugged a single brown paper bag. Rosemary carried nothing but a purse the size of a sandwich, on a glittery golden chain.

"Is it them?" Adrian asked.

"It's them."

He bent inside her trunk and started rearranging groceries again. "Tell me when they're gone," he said.

The couple crossed to a low red sports car. Rosemary was at least Skipper's height if not taller, and she had the slouching, indifferent gait of a runway model. If she had walked into a wall, her hipbones would have hit first.

"Are they looking our way?" Adrian asked.

"I don't think they see us."

Skipper opened the passenger door, and Rosemary folded herself out of sight. He handed her the sack of groceries and shut the door, strode to the driver's side, slid in and started the engine. Only then did he shut his own door. With a tightly knit, snarling sound, the little car spun around and buzzed off.

"They're gone," Delia said.

Adrian closed the trunk lid. He seemed older now. For the first time, Delia saw the fragile lines etched at the corners of his mouth.

"Well," he said sadly.

It seemed crass to mention money again, but she had to say, "About the check ..."

"Please. I owe *you*," he said. "I owe you more than that. Thanks for going along with me on this."

"It was nothing," she told him. "I just wish there'd been, oh, somebody really appropriate."

"Appropriate?"

"Somebody ... *you* know," she said. "As glamorous as your wife."

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "Why, you're very pretty! You have such a little face, like a flower."

She felt herself blushing. He must have thought she was fishing for compliments. "Anyhow, I'm glad I could help out," she said. She backed away from him and opened her car door. "Bye, now!"

“Goodbye,” he said. “Thanks again.”

As if he had been her host, he went on standing there while she maneuvered out of the parking slot. Naturally she made a mess of it, knowing he was watching. She cut her wheel too sharply, and the power-steering belt gave an embarrassing screech. But finally the car was free and she rolled away. Her rearview mirror showed Adrian lifting a palm in farewell, holding it steady until she turned south at the light.

Halfway home, she had a sudden realization: she should have given him the groceries he had picked out. Good heavens—all that pasta, those little grains of orzo, and now she remembered his consommé too. Consommé madrilene: she wasn't even sure how to pronounce it. She was driving away with property that belonged to someone else, and it was shameful how pleased she felt, and how lucky, and how rich.

The trouble with plastic bags was, those convenient handles tempted you to carry too many at once. Delia had forgotten that. She remembered halfway across her front yard, when the crooks of her fingers began to ache. She hadn't been able to bring the car around to the rear because someone's station wagon was blocking the driveway. Nailed to the trunk of the largest oak was a rusty metal sign directing patients to park on the street, but people tended to ignore it.

She circled the front porch and picked her way through the scribble of spent forsythia bushes at the side. This was a large house but shabby, its brown shingles streaked with mildew and its shutters snaggletoothed where the louvers had fallen out over the years. Delia had never lived anywhere else. Neither had her father, for that matter. Her mother, an import from the Eastern Shore, had died of kidney failure before Delia could remember leaving her in the care of her father and her two older sisters. Delia had played hopscotch on the parquet squares in the hall while her father doctored his patients in the glassed-in porch off the kitchen, and she had married his assistant beneath the sprawling brass chandelier that reminded her to this day of a daddy longlegs. Even after the wedding she had not moved away but simply installed her husband among her sweet-sixteen bedroom furniture, and once her children were born it was not uncommon for a patient to wander out of the waiting room calling, "Delia? Where are you, darlin'? Just wanted to see how those precious little babies were getting along."

The cat was perched on the back stoop, meowing at her reproachfully. His short gray fur was flattened here and there by drops of water. "Didn't I tell you?" Delia scolded as she led him in. "Didn't I warn you the grass would still be wet?" Her shoes were soaked just from crossing the lawn, the thin soles cold and papery-feeling. She stepped out of them as soon as she entered the kitchen. "Well, hi there!" she said to her son. He sat slumped over the table in his pajamas, buttering a piece of toast. She placed her bags on the counter and said, "Fancy finding you awake so early!"

"It's not like I had any choice," he told her glumly.

He was her youngest child and the one who most resembled her, she had always thought (with his hair the light-brown color and frazzled texture of binder's twine, his freckled white face shadowed violet beneath the eyes), but last month he had turned fifteen, and all at once she saw more of Sam in him. He had shot up to nearly six feet, and his pointy chin had suddenly squared, and his hands had grown muscular and disconcertingly competent-looking. Even the way he held his butter knife suggested some new authority.

His voice was Sam's too: deep but fine-grained, not subject to the cracks and creaks his brother had gone through. "I hope you bought cornflakes," he told her.

"Why, no, I—"

"Aw, Mom!"

“But wait till you hear why I didn’t,” she said. “The funniest thing, Carroll! This real adventure. I was standing in the produce section, minding my own business—”

“There’s not one decent thing in this house to eat.”

“Well, you don’t usually want breakfast on a Saturday.”

He scowled at her. “Try telling Ramsay that,” he said.

“Ramsay?”

“He’s the one who woke me. Came stumbling into the room in broad daylight, out all night with his lady friend. No way could I get back to sleep after that.”

Delia turned her attention to the grocery bags. (She knew where this conversation was headed.) She started rummaging through them as if the cornflakes might emerge after all. “But let me tell you my adventure,” she said over her shoulder. “Out of the blue, this man standing next to me. ... Good-looking? He looked like my very first sweetheart, Will Britt. I don’t believe I ever mentioned Will to you.”

“Mom,” Carroll said. “When are you going to let me move across the hall?”

“Oh, Carroll.”

“Nobody else I know has to room with their brother.”

“Now, now. Plenty of people in this world have to room with whole families,” she told him.

“Not with their boozehead college-boy brother, though. Not when there’s another room perfectly empty, right across the hall.”

Delia set down the box of orzo and faced him squarely. She noticed that he needed a haircut, but this was not the moment to point that out. “Carroll, I’m sorry,” she said, “but I am just not ready.”

“Aunt Eliza’s ready! Why aren’t you? Aunt Liza was Grandpa’s daughter too, and she says of course I should have his room. She doesn’t understand what’s stopping me.”

“Oh, listen to us!” Delia said gaily. “Spoiling such a pretty day with disagreements! Where’s your father? Is he seeing a patient?”

Carroll didn’t answer. He had dropped his toast to his plate, and now he sat tipping his chair back defiantly, no doubt adding more dents to the linoleum. Delia sighed.

“Sweetie,” she said, “I do know how you feel. And pretty soon you can have the room, I promise. But not just yet! Not right now! Right now it still smells of his pipe tobacco.”

“It won’t once I’m living there,” Carroll said.

“But that’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Shoot, I’ll take up smoking, then.”

She waved his words away with a dutiful laugh. “Anyhow,” she said. “Is your father with a patient?”

“Naw.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s out running.”

“He’s what?”

Carroll picked up his toast again and chomped down on it noisily.

“He’s doing *what?*”

“He’s running, Mom.”

“Well, didn’t you at least offer to go with him?”

“He’s only running around the Gilman track, for gosh sakes.”

“I asked you children; I begged you not to let him go alone. What if something happens and no one’s around to help?”

“Fat chance, on the Gilman track,” Carroll said.

“He shouldn’t be running anyway. He ought to be walking.”

“Running’s good for him,” Carroll said. “Look. He’s not worried. His doctor’s not worried. So what’s your problem, Mom?”

Delia could have come up with so many responses to that; all she did was press a hand to her forehead.

These were the facts she had neglected to tell that young man in the supermarket: She was a sad, tired, anxious, forty-year-old woman who hadn’t had a champagne brunch in decades. And her husband was even older, by a good fifteen years, and just this past February he had suffered a bout of severe chest pain. Angina, they said in the emergency room. And now she was terrified any time he went anywhere alone, and she hated to let him drive, and she kept finding excuses not to make love for fear it would kill him, and at night while he slept she lay awake, tensing every muscle between each of his long, slow breaths.

And not only were her children past infancy; they were huge. They were great galumphing, unmannerly, supercilious creatures—Susie a Goucher junior consumed by a baffling enthusiasm for various outdoor sports; Ramsay a Hopkins freshman on the brink of flunking out, thanks to the twenty-eight-year-old single-parent girlfriend he had somehow acquired. (And both of them, Susie and Ramsay both, were miffed beyond belief that their family finances forced them to live at home.) And Delia’s baby, her sweet, winsome Carroll, had been replaced by this rude adolescent, flinching from his mother’s hugs and criticizing her clothes and rolling his eyes disgustedly at every word she uttered.

Like now, for instance. Determined to start afresh, she perked all her features upward and asked, “Any calls while I was gone?” and he said, “Why would I answer the *grown-ups’* line, not bothering to add a question mark.

Because the grown-ups buy the celery for your favorite mint pea soup, she could have told him, but years of dealing with teenagers had turned her into a pacifist, and she merely padded out of the kitchen in her stocking feet and crossed the hall to the study, where Sam kept the answering machine.

The study was what they called it, and books did line the floor-to-ceiling shelves, but mainly this was a TV room now. The velvet draperies were kept permanently drawn, coloring the air the dusty dark red of an old-time movie house. Soft-drink cans and empty pretzel bags and stacks of rented videotapes littered the coffee table, and Susie lounged on the couch watching Saturday-morning cartoons with her boyfriend, Driscoll Avery. The two of them had

been dating so long that they looked like brother and sister, with their smooth beige coloring and stocky, waistless figures and identical baggy sweat suits. Driscoll barely blinked when Delia entered. Susie didn't even do that much; just flipped a channel on the remote control.

"Morning, you two," Delia said. "Any calls?"

Susie shrugged and flipped another channel. Driscoll yawned out loud. Just for that, Delia didn't excuse herself when she walked in front of them to the answering machine. She bent to press the Message button, but nothing happened. Electronic devices were always doubling back on her. "How do I—?" she said, and then an old man's splintery voice filled the room. "Dr. Grinstead, can you get back to me right away? It's Grayson Knowles, and I told the pharmacist about those pills, but he asked if—"

Whatever the pharmacist had asked was submerged by a flood of Bugs Bunny music. Susie must have raised the volume on the TV. *Beep*, the machine said, and then Delia's sister came on. "Dee, it's Eliza. I need an address. Could you please call me at work?"

"What's she doing at work on a Saturday?" Delia asked, but nobody answered.

Beep. "This is Myrtle Allingham," an old woman stated forthrightly.

"Oh, God," Susie told Driscoll.

"Marshall and I were wondering if you-all would like to take supper with us Sunday evening. Nothing fancy! Just us folks! And do tell young Miss Susie she should bring the darlin' Driscoll. Say seven o'clock?"

Beep beep beep beep beep. The end.

"We went *last* time," Susie said, slouching lower on the couch. "Count us out."

"Well, I don't know," Driscoll said. "That crab dip she served was not half bad."

"We aren't going, Driscoll, so forget it."

"She's lonesome, is all," Delia said. "Stuck at home with her hip, no way to get around—"

Something banged overhead.

"What's that?" she asked.

More bangs. Or clanks, really. *Clank! Clank!* at measured intervals, as if on purpose.

"Plumber?" Driscoll said tentatively.

"What plumber?"

"Plumber upstairs in the bathroom?"

"I never called for a plumber."

"Dr. Grinstead did, maybe?"

Delia gave Susie a look. Susie met it blandly.

"I don't know what's come over that man," Delia said. "He's been re—what's the word?—rejuvenating, resuscitating ..." Fully aware that neither one of them was listening, she walked on out of the room, still talking. "... renovating, I mean: renovating this house to a fare-thee-well. If it's about that place in the ceiling, then really you'd think ..."

She climbed the stairs, halfway up encountering the cat, who was hurrying down in a scattered, ungraceful fashion. Vernon detested loud noises. "Hello?" Delia called. She poked

her head into the bathroom off the hall. A ponytailed man in coveralls crouched beside the claw-footed tub, studying its pipes. "Well, hello," she said.

He twisted around to look at her. "Oh. Hey," he said.

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"Can't say just yet," he said. He turned back to the pipes.

She waited a moment, in case he wanted to add something, but she could tell he was one of those repairmen who think only the husband worth talking to.

In her bedroom, she sat down on Sam's side of the bed, picked up the telephone, and dialed Eliza's work number. "Pratt Library," a woman said.

"Eliza Felson, please."

"Just a minute."

Delia propped a pillow against the headboard, and then she swung her feet up onto the frilled pink spread. The plumber had progressed to the bathroom between her room and her father's. She couldn't see him, but she could hear him banging around. What information could you hope to gain from whacking pipes?

"I'm sorry," the woman said, "but we can't seem to locate Miss Felson. Are you sure she's working today?"

"She must be; she told me to call her there, and she isn't here at home."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, thanks anyway."

She hung up. The plumber was whistling "Clementine." While Delia was dialing Mrs. Allingham, he ambled into the bedroom, still whistling, and she demurely smoothed her skirt around her knees. He squatted in front of the miniature door that opened onto the pipes in the wall. *Thou art lost and gone forever*, he whistled; Delia mentally supplied the words. On a tug at the door's wooden knob, and it came off in his hand. She could have told him it would. She watched with some satisfaction as he muttered a curse beneath his breath and fished a pair of pliers from his belt loop.

Seven rings. Eight. She wasn't discouraged. Mrs. Allingham walked with a limp, and it took her ages to get to the phone.

Nine rings. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Allingham, it's Delia."

"Delia, dear! How *are* you?"

"I'm fine, how are you?"

"Oh, we're fine, doing just fine. Enjoying this nice spring weather! Nearly forgot what sunshine looks like, till today."

"Yes, me too," Delia said. She was overtaken suddenly by a swell of something like homesickness; Mrs. Allingham's chipper, slightly rasping voice was so reminiscent of all the women on this street where she had grown up. "Mrs. Allingham," she said, "Sam and I would love to come for supper tomorrow night, but we can't bring the children, I'm afraid."

“Oh!” Mrs. Allingham said.

“It’s just that they’re so busy these days. You know how it is.”

“Yes, of course,” Mrs. Allingham said faintly.

“But another time, maybe! They always enjoy your company.”

“Yes, well, and we enjoy theirs too.”

“So we’ll see you at seven tomorrow,” Delia said briskly, for she could hear Sam downstairs and she had a million things to do. “Goodbye till then.”

By now the plumber had the little door prized open and was peering into the bowels of the wall, but she knew better than to ask him what he’d found.

In the kitchen, Sam stood propped against a counter, taking off his mud-caked running shoes. He was telling Carroll, “... sort of a toboggan effect when you hit those cedar chips ..

“Sam, how could you go off alone like that?” Delia asked. “You knew I’d worry!”

“Hello, Dee,” he said.

His T-shirt was translucent with sweat, his sharp-boned face glistened, and his glasses were fogged. His hair—that shade that could be either blond or gray, it had faded so imperceptibly—lay in damp spikes on his forehead. “Look at you,” Delia scolded. “You got overheated. You went running all alone and got overheated to boot when the doctor told you a dozen times—

“Whose car is that in the driveway?”

“Car?”

“Station wagon parked in the driveway.”

“Well, doesn’t it belong to a patient? No, I guess not.”

“Plumber,” Carroll said from behind a glass of orange juice.

“Oh, good,” Sam said. “The plumber’s here.”

He set his shoes on the doormat and started out of the kitchen, no doubt happily anticipating one of those laconic, man-to-man discussions of valves and joints and gaskets. “Sam, wait,” Delia said, for she had a pang of guilt nagging at the back of her mind. “Before you forget—”

He turned, already wary.

“Mr. Knowles phoned—something to do with his pills,” she said.

“I thought he got that straightened out.”

“And also, um, Mrs. Allingham. She wanted to know if we could come for—”

He groaned. “No,” he said, “we can’t.”

“But you haven’t even heard yet! A light Sunday supper, she said, and I told her—”

“I’m sure not going,” Carroll broke in.

“No, I told her that; I told her you kids were tied up. But you and I, Sam, just for—”

“We can’t make it,” Sam said flatly.

“But I’ve already accepted.”

He had been on the point of turning away again, but now he stopped and looked at her.

“I know I should have checked with you first, but by accident somehow I just went ahead and accepted.”

“Well, then,” he said, “you’ll have to call her back and unaccept.”

“But, Sam!”

He left.

She looked over at Carroll. “How can he be so mean?” she asked, but Carroll just raised one eyebrow in that urbane new way she suspected him of practicing in the mirror.

Sometimes she felt like a tiny gnat, whirring around her family’s edges.

The linoleum was slick and chilly beneath her feet, and she would have gone back upstairs for her slippers except that Sam and the plumber were upstairs. Instead, she turned to her grocery bags and unpacked several more boxes of pasta. Maybe she could tell Mrs. Allingham that Sam had been taken ill. That was always risky, though, when you lived in the same block and could so easily be observed, hale and hearty, stepping out to collect your morning paper or whatever. She sighed and shut a cabinet door. “When did this start happening to me?” she asked Carroll.

“Huh?”

“When did sweet and cute turn into silly and inefficient?”

He didn’t seem to have an opinion.

Her sister appeared in the doorway, rolling up her shirt sleeves. “Morning, all!” she announced.

“Eliza?”

There were days when Eliza seemed almost gnomish, and this was one of them. She wore her gardening clothes—a pith helmet that all but obscured her straight black Dutch-boy bob, khaki shirt and stubby brown trousers, and boys’ brown oxfords with thick, thick soles intended to make her seem taller. (She was the shortest of the three Felson sisters.) Her horn-rimmed glasses overwhelmed her small, blunt, sallow face. “I figured I’d transplant some of those herbs before the ground dried out,” she told Delia.

“But I thought you were at work.”

“Work? It’s Saturday.”

“You called from work, I thought.”

Eliza looked over at Carroll. He raised that eyebrow again.

“You called and left a message on the machine,” Delia said, “asking me to find an address.”

“That was ten days ago, at least. I needed Jenny Coop’s address, remember?”

“Then why did I just get it off the answering machine?”

“Mom,” Carroll said. “You must have been playing back *old* calls.”

“Well, how is that possible?”

“You didn’t have the machine turned on in the first place, see, and then when you pressed the Message button—”

“Oh, Lord,” Delia said. “Mrs. Allingham.”

“Is there coffee?” Eliza asked her.

“Not that I know of. Oh, Lord ...”

She went over to the wall phone and dialed Mrs. Allingham’s number. “I’m snug in bed. Eliza was telling Carroll, “thinking, *Goody, Saturday morning, I can sleep till noon*—when who should come crawling through that door in the back of my closet but another one of your father’s blasted repairmen.”

“Mrs. Allingham?” Delia said into the phone. “This is Delia again. Mrs. Allingham, I feel like such a dummy but it seems I got my calls mixed up and it was *last* week you invited us for. And of course last week we went, and a lovely time we had too; did I write you a thank-you note? I meant to write you a thank-you note. But *this* week we’re not coming; I mean realize now that you didn’t invite us for—”

“But, Delia, darlin’, we’d be happy to have you this week! We’d be happy to have you an old time, and I’ve already sent Marshall off to the Gourmet To Go with a shopping list.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Delia said, but then the coffee grinder started up—a deafening racket—and she shouted, “Anyhow! We’ll have to invite you to our place, very soon! Goodbye!”

She replaced the receiver and glared at Eliza.

“If only coffee tasted as good as it smells,” Eliza said serenely when the grinder stopped.

Sam and the plumber were descending the stairs. Delia could hear the plumber’s elasticized East Baltimore vowels; he was waxing lyrical about water. “It’s the most amazing substance he was saying. “It’ll burst out one place and run twenty-five feet along the underside of a pipe and commence to dripping another place, where you least expect to see it. It’ll lie in wait, it’ll bide its time, it’ll search out some little cranny you would never think to look.”

Delia placed her hands on her hips and stood waiting. The instant the two men stepped through the door, she said, “I certainly hope you’re satisfied, Sam Grinstead.”

“Hmm?”

“I called back poor Mrs. Allingham and canceled supper.”

“Oh, good,” Sam said absently.

“I broke our promise. I ducked out of our commitment. I probably hurt her feelings for a time,” Delia told him.

But Sam wasn’t listening. He was following the plumber’s forefinger as it pointed upward to a line of blistered plaster. And Eliza was measuring coffee, so the only one who paid attention was Carroll. He sent Delia a look of utter contempt.

Delia turned sheepishly to her grocery bags. From the depths of one she drew the celeriac, pale green and pearly and precisely ribbed. She gazed at it for a long, thoughtful moment. “Aren’t you clever to say so!” she heard Adrian exclaim once again, and she held the words close; she hugged them to her breast as she turned back to give her son a beatific smile.

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