
Anne Tyler
THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER
BREATHING LESSONS
'A WORK OF ART'
GUARDIAN
'HER FINEST NOVEL'
IRISH TIMES
VINTAGE

Contents

About the Book

Meet Maggie Moran. Nearing fifty and married with two children, she and her husband drive from Baltimore to Deer Lick to attend the funeral of a friend one hot summer day.

During the course of the journey, with its several unexpected detours into the lives of old friends and grown children, Maggie’s eternal optimism and her inexhaustible passion for sorting out other people’s lives and willing them to fall in love is severely tested…

About the Author

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1941 and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. She is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Breathing Lessons* and many other bestselling novels, including *The Accidental Tourist*, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, *Saint Maybe*, *Ladder of Years*, *A Patchwork Planet*, *Back When We Were Grownups*, *The Amateur Marriage*, *Digging to America* and *The Beginner's Goodbye*. In 2012 she received the *Sunday Times* Award for literary excellence, which recognises a lifetime's achievement in books. In 2015 *A Spool of Blue Thread* was a *Sunday Times* bestseller and shortlisted for both the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction and the Man Booker Prize.

Also by Anne Tyler

If Morning Ever Comes
The Tin Can Tree
A Slipping-Down Life
The Clock Winder
Celestial Navigation
Searching for Caleb
Earthly Possessions
Morgan's Passing
Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant
The Accidental Tourist
Saint Maybe
Ladder of Years
A Patchwork Planet
Back When We Were Grownups
The Amateur Marriage
Digging to America
Noah's Compass
The Beginner's Goodbye
A Spool of Blue Thread

ANNE TYLER

Breathing Lessons

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

ONE

1

Maggie and Ira Moran had to go to a funeral in Deer Lick, Pennsylvania. Maggie's girlhood friend had lost her husband. Deer Lick lay on a narrow country road some ninety miles north of Baltimore, and the funeral was scheduled for ten-thirty Saturday morning; so Ira figured they should start around eight. This made him grumpy. (He was not an early-morning kind of man.) Also Saturday was his busiest day at work, and he had no one to cover for him. Also their car was in the body shop. It had needed extensive repairs and Saturday morning at opening time, eight o'clock exactly, was the soonest they could get it back. Ira said maybe they'd just better not go, but Maggie said they had to. She and Serena had been friends forever. Or nearly forever: forty-two years, beginning with Miss Kimmel's first grade.

They planned to wake up at seven, but Maggie must have set the alarm wrong and so they overslept. They had to dress in a hurry and rush through breakfast, making do with faucet coffee and cold cereal. Then Ira headed off for the store on foot to leave a note for his customers, and Maggie walked to the body shop. She was wearing her best dress—blue and white sprigged, with cape sleeves—and crisp black pumps, on account of the funeral. The pumps were only medium-heeled but slowed her down some anyway; she was more used to crepe soles. Another problem was that the crotch of her panty hose had somehow slipped to about the middle of her thighs, so she had to take shortened, unnaturally level steps like a chunky little wind-up toy wheeling along the sidewalk.

Luckily, the body shop was only a few blocks away. (In this part of town things were intermingled—small frame houses

like theirs sitting among portrait photographers' studios, one-woman beauty parlors, driving schools, and podiatry clinics.) And the weather was perfect—a warm, sunny day in September, with just enough breeze to cool her face. She patted down her bangs where they tended to frizz out like a forelock. She hugged her dress-up purse under her arm. She turned left at the corner and there was Harbor Body and Fender, with the peeling green garage doors already hoisted up and the cavernous interior smelling of some sharp-scented paint that made her think of nail polish.

She had her check all ready and the manager said the keys were in the car, so in no time she was free to go. The car was parked toward the rear of the shop, an elderly gray-blue Dodge. It looked better than it had in years. They had straightened the rear bumper, replaced the mangled trunk lid, ironed out a half-dozen crimps here and there, and covered over the dapples of rust on the doors. Ira was right: no need to buy a new car after all. She slid behind the wheel. When she turned the ignition key, the radio came on—Mel Spruce's AM *Baltimore*, a call-in talk show. She let it run, for the moment. She adjusted the seat, which had been moved back for someone taller, and she tilted the rearview mirror downward. Her own face flashed toward her, round and slightly shiny, her blue eyes quirked at the inner corners as if she were worried about something when in fact she was only straining to see in the gloom. She shifted gears and sailed smoothly toward the front of the shop, where the manager stood frowning at a clipboard just outside his office door.

Today's question on *AM Baltimore* was: "What Makes an Ideal Marriage?" A woman was phoning in to say it was common interests. "Like if you both watch the same kind of programs on TV," she explained. Maggie couldn't care less what made an ideal marriage. (She'd been married twenty-eight years.) She rolled down her window and called, "Bye now!" and the manager glanced up from his clipboard. She

glided past him—a woman in charge of herself, for once, lipsticked and medium-heeled and driving an undented car.

A soft voice on the radio said, “Well, I’m about to remarry? The first time was purely for love? It was genuine, true love and it didn’t work at all. Next Saturday I’m marrying for security.”

Maggie looked over at the dial and said, “Fiona?”

She meant to brake, but accelerated instead and shot out of the garage and directly into the street. A Pepsi truck approaching from the left smashed into her left front fender—the only spot that had never, up till now, had the slightest thing go wrong with it.

Back when Maggie played baseball with her brothers, she used to get hurt but say she was fine, for fear they would make her quit. She’d pick herself up and run on without a limp, even if her knee was killing her. Now she was reminded of that, for when the manager rushed over, shouting, “What the … ? Are you all right?” she stared straight ahead in a dignified way and told him, “Certainly. Why do you ask?” and drove on before the Pepsi driver could climb out of his truck, which was probably just as well considering the look on his face. But in fact her fender was making a very upsetting noise, something like a piece of tin dragging over gravel, so as soon as she’d turned the corner and the two men—one scratching his head, one waving his arms—had disappeared from her rearview mirror, she came to a stop. Fiona was not on the radio anymore. Instead a woman with a raspy tenor was comparing her five husbands. Maggie cut the motor and got out. She could see what was causing the trouble. The fender was crumpled inward so the tire was hitting against it; she was surprised the wheel could turn, even. She squatted on the curb, grasped the rim of the fender in both hands, and tugged. (She remembered hunkering low in the tall grass of the outfield and stealthily, wincingly peeling her jeans leg away from the patch of blood on her knee.) Flakes of gray-blue

paint fell into her lap. Someone passed on the sidewalk behind her but she pretended not to notice and tugged again. This time the fender moved, not far but enough to clear the tire, and she stood up and dusted off her hands. Then she climbed back inside the car but for a minute simply sat there. “Fiona!” she said again. When she restarted the engine, the radio was advertising bank loans and she switched it off.

Ira was waiting in front of his store, unfamiliar and oddly dashing in his navy suit. A shock of ropy black, gray-threaded hair hung over his forehead. Above him a metal sign swung in the breeze: SAM’S FRAME SHOP. PICTURE FRAMING. MATTING, YOUR NEEDLEWORK PROFESSIONALLY DISPLAYED. Sam was Ira’s father, who had not had a thing to do with the business since coming down with a “weak heart” thirty years before. Maggie always put “weak heart” in quotation marks. She made a point of ignoring the apartment windows above the shop, where Sam spent his cramped, idle, querulous days with Ira’s two sisters. He would probably be standing there watching. She parked next to the curb and slid over to the passenger seat.

Ira’s expression was a study as he approached the car. Starting out pleased and approving, he rounded the hood and drew up short when he came upon the left fender. His long, bony, olive face grew longer. His eyes, already so narrow you couldn’t be sure if they were black or merely dark brown, turned to puzzled, downward-slanting slits. He opened the door and got in and gave her a sorrowful stare.

“There was an unexpected situation,” Maggie told him.

“Just between here and the body shop?”

“I heard Fiona on the radio.”

“That’s five blocks! Just five or six blocks.”

“Ira, Fiona’s getting married.”

He gave up thinking of the car, she was relieved to see. Something cleared on his forehead. He looked at her a moment and then said, “Fiona who?”

“Fiona your daughter-in-law, Ira. How many Fionas do we know? Fiona the mother of your only grandchild, and now she’s up and marrying some total stranger purely for security.”

Ira slid the seat farther back and then pulled away from the curb. He seemed to be listening for something—perhaps for the sound of the wheel hitting. But evidently her tug on the fender had done the trick. He said, “Where’d you hear this?”

“On the radio while I was driving.”

“They’d announce a thing like that on the radio?”

“She telephoned it in.”

“That seems kind of … self-important, if you want my honest opinion,” Ira said.

“No, she was just—and she said that Jesse was the only one she’d ever truly loved.”

“She said this on the *radio*?”

“It was a talk show, Ira.”

“Well, I don’t know why everyone has to go spilling their guts in public these days,” Ira said.

“Do you suppose Jesse could have been listening?” Maggie asked. The thought had just occurred to her.

“Jesse? At this hour? He’s doing well if he’s up before noon.”

Maggie didn’t argue with that, although she could have. The fact was that Jesse was an early riser, and anyhow, he worked on Saturdays. What Ira was implying was that he was shiftless. (Ira was much harder on their son than Maggie was. He didn’t see half as many good points to him.) She faced forward and watched the shops and houses sliding past, the few pedestrians out with their dogs. This had been the driest summer in memory and the sidewalks had a chalky look. The air hung like gauze. A boy in front of Poor Man’s Grocery was tenderly dusting his bicycle spokes with a cloth.

“So you started out on Empry Street,” Ira said.

“Hmm?”

“Where the body shop is.”

“Yes, Empry Street.”

“And then cut over to Daimler …”

He was back on the subject of the fender. She said, “I did it driving out of the garage.”

“You mean right there? Right at the body shop?”

“I went to hit the brake but I hit the gas instead.”

“How could that happen?”

“Well, Fiona came on the radio and I was startled.”

“I mean the brake isn’t something you have to think about, Maggie. You’ve been driving since you were sixteen years old. How could you mix up the brake with the gas pedal?”

“I just did, Ira. All right? I just got startled and I did. So let’s drop it.”

“I mean a brake is more or less *reflex*.”

“If it means so much to you I’ll pay for it out of my salary.”

Now it was his turn to hold his tongue. She saw him start to speak and then change his mind. (Her salary was laughable. She tended old folks in a nursing home.)

If they’d had more warning, she thought, she would have cleaned the car’s interior before they set out. The dashboard was littered with parking-lot stubs. Soft-drink cups and paper napkins covered the floor at her feet. Also there were loops of black and red wire sagging beneath the glove compartment; nudge them accidentally as you crossed your legs and you’d disconnect the radio. She considered that to be Ira’s doing. Men just generated wires and cords and electrical tape everywhere they went, somehow. They might not even be aware of it.

They were traveling north on Belair Road now. The scenery grew choppy. Stretches of playgrounds and cemeteries were broken suddenly by clumps of small businesses—liquor stores, pizza parlors, dark little bars and taverns dwarfed by the giant dish antennas on their roofs.

Then another playground would open out. And the traffic was heavier by the minute. Everyone else was going somewhere festive and Saturday-morningish, Maggie was certain. Most of the back seats were stuffed with children. It was the hour for gymnastics lessons and baseball practice.

"The other day," Maggie told Ira, "I forgot how to say 'car pool.'"

"Why would you need to remember?" Ira asked.

"Well, that's my point."

"Pardon?"

"It shows you how time has passed, is what I'm saying. I wanted to tell one of my patients her daughter wouldn't be visiting. I said, 'Today's her day for, um,' and I couldn't think of the words. I could not think of 'car pool.' But it seems like just last week that Jesse had a game or hockey camp, Daisy had a Brownie meeting … Why, I used to spend all Saturday behind the wheel!"

"Speaking of which," Ira said, "was it another vehicle you hit? Or just a telephone pole?"

Maggie dug in her purse for her sunglasses. "It was a truck," she said.

"Good grief. You do it any damage?"

"I didn't notice."

"You didn't notice."

"I didn't stop to look."

She put on her sunglasses and blinked. Everything turned muted and more elegant.

"You left the scene of an accident, Maggie?"

"It wasn't an accident! It was only one of those little, like, kind of things that just happen. Why make such a big deal of it?"

"Let me see if I've got this straight," Ira said. "You zoomed out of the body shop, slammed into a truck, and kept on going."

"No, the truck slammed into *me*."

"But you were the one at fault."

“Well, yes, I suppose I was, if you insist on holding someone to blame.”

“And so then you just drove on away.”

“Right.”

He was silent. Not a good silence.

“It was a great big huge Pepsi truck,” Maggie said. “It was practically an armored tank! I bet I didn’t so much as scratch it.”

“But you never checked to make sure.”

“I was worried I’d be late,” Maggie said. “You’re the one who insisted on allowing extra travel time.”

“You realize the body shop people have your name and address, don’t you? All that driver has to do is ask them. We’re going to find a policeman waiting for us on our doorstep.”

“Ira, will you drop it?” Maggie asked. “Don’t you see I have a lot on my mind? I’m heading toward the funeral of my oldest, dearest friend’s husband; no telling what Serena’s dealing with right now, and here I am, a whole state away. And then on top of that I have to hear it on the radio that Fiona’s getting married, when it’s plain as the nose on your face she and Jesse still love each other. They’ve always loved each other; they never stopped; it’s just that they can’t, oh, connect, somehow. And besides that, my one and only grandchild is all at once going to have to adjust to a brand-new stepfather. I feel like we’re just flying apart! All my friends and relatives just flying off from me like the … expanding universe or something! Now we’ll never see that child, do you realize that?”

“We never see her anyhow,” Ira said mildly. He braked for a red light.

“For all we know, this new husband could be a molester,” Maggie said.

“I’m sure Fiona would choose better than that, Maggie.”

She shot him a look. (It wasn’t like him to say anything good about Fiona.) He was peering up at the traffic light.

Squint lines radiated from the corners of his eyes. “Well, of course she would *try* to choose well,” Maggie said carefully, “but even the most sensible person on God’s earth can’t predict every single problem, can she? Maybe he’s somebody smooth and suave. Maybe he’ll treat Leroy just fine till he’s settled into the family.”

The light changed. Ira drove on.

“Leroy,” Maggie said reflectively. “Do you think we’ll ever get used to that name? Sounds like a boy’s name. Sounds like a football player. And the way they pronounce it: *Lee*-roy. Country.”

“Did you bring that map I set out on the breakfast table?” Ira asked.

“Sometimes I think we should just start pronouncing it our way,” Maggie said. “Le-*roy*.” She considered.

“The map, Maggie. Did you bring it?”

“It’s in my purse. Le *Rwah*,” she said, gargling the *R* like a Frenchman.

“It’s not as if we still had anything to do with her,” Ira said.

“We could, though, Ira. We could visit her this very afternoon.”

“Huh?”

“Look at where they live: Cartwheel, Pennsylvania. It’s practically on the road to Deer Lick. What we could do,” she said, digging through her purse, “is go to the funeral, see, and … Oh, where is that map? Go to the funeral and then head back down Route One to … You know, I don’t think I brought that map after all.”

“Great, Maggie.”

“I think I left it on the table.”

“I asked you when we were setting out, remember? I said, ‘Are you going to bring the map, or am I?’ You said, ‘I am. I’ll just stick it in my purse.’”

“Well, I don’t know why you’re making such a fuss about it,” Maggie said. “All we’ve got to do is watch the road signs;

anyone could manage that much."

"It's a little more complicated than that," Ira said.

"Besides, we have those directions Serena gave me over the phone."

"Maggie. Do you honestly believe any directions of Serena's could get us where we'd care to go? Ha! We'd find ourselves in Canada someplace. We'd be off in Arizona!"

"Well, you don't have to get so excited about it."

"We would never see home again," Ira said.

Maggie shook her billfold and a pack of Kleenex from her purse.

"Serena's the one who made us late for her own wedding reception, remember that?" Ira said. "At that crazy little banquet hall we spent an hour locating."

"Really, Ira. You always act like women are such flibbertigibbets," Maggie said. She gave up searching through her purse; evidently she had mislaid Serena's directions as well. She said, "It's Fiona's own good I'm thinking of. She'll need us to baby-sit."

"Baby-sit?"

"During the honeymoon."

He gave her a look that she couldn't quite read.

"She's getting married next Saturday," Maggie said. "You can't take a seven-year-old on a honeymoon."

He still said nothing.

They were out beyond the city limits now and the houses had thinned. They passed a used-car lot, a scratchy bit of woods, a shopping mall with a few scattered early-bird cars parked on a concrete wasteland. Ira started whistling. Maggie stopped fiddling with her purse straps and grew still.

There were times when Ira didn't say a dozen words all day, and even when he did talk you couldn't guess what he was feeling. He was a closed-in, isolated man—his most serious flaw. But what he failed to realize was, his whistling could tell the whole story. For instance—an unsettling example—after a terrible fight in the early days of their

marriage they had more or less smoothed things over, patted them into place again, and then he'd gone off to work whistling a song she couldn't identify. It wasn't till later that the words occurred to her. *I wonder if I care as much*, was the way they went, *as I did before* ...

But often the association was something trivial, something circumstantial—"This Old House" while he tackled a minor repair job, or "The Wichita Lineman" whenever he helped bring in the laundry. *Do, do, that voodoo* ... he whistled, unknowingly, five minutes after circling a pile of dog do on the sidewalk. And of course there were times when Maggie had no idea what he was whistling. This piece right now, say: something sort of croony, something they might play on WLIF. Well, maybe he'd merely heard it while shaving, in which case it meant nothing at all.

A Patsy Cline song; that's what it was. Patsy Cline's "Crazy."

She sat up sharply and said, "Perfectly sane people baby-sit their grandchildren, Ira Moran."

He looked startled.

"They keep them for months. Whole summers," she told him.

He said, "They don't pay drop-in visits, though."

"Certainly they do!"

"Ann Landers claims drop-in visits are inconsiderate," he said.

Ann Landers, his personal heroine.

"And it's not like we're blood relatives," he said. "We're not even Fiona's in-laws anymore."

"We're Leroy's grandparents till the day we die," Maggie told him.

He didn't have any answer for that.

This stretch of road was such a mess. Things had been allowed to just happen—a barbecue joint sprouting here, a swim-pool display room there. A pickup parked on the shoulder overflowed with pumpkins: ALL U CAN CARRY $1.50, the

hand-lettered sign read. The pumpkins reminded Maggie of fall, but in fact it was so warm now that a line of moisture stood out on her upper lip. She rolled down her window, recoiled from the hot air, and rolled it up again. Anyway, enough of a breeze came from Ira's side. He drove one-handed, with his left elbow jutting over the sill. The sleeves of his suit had rucked up to show his wristbones.

Serena used to say Ira was a mystery. That was a compliment, in those days. Maggie wasn't even dating Ira, she was engaged to someone else, but Serena kept saying, "How can you resist him? He's such a mystery. He's so mysterious." "I don't have to resist him. He's not after me," Maggie had said. Although she had wondered. (Serena was right. He was such a mystery.) But Serena herself had chosen the most open-faced boy in the world. Funny old Max! Not a secret in him. "This here is my happiest memory," Max had said once. (He'd been twenty at the time, just finishing his freshman year at UNC.) "Me and these two fraternity brothers, we go out partying. And I have a tad bit too much to drink, so coming home I pass out in the back seat and when I wake up they've driven clear to Carolina Beach and left me there on the sand. Big joke on me: Ha-ha. It's six o'clock in the morning and I sit up and all I can see is sky, layers and layers of hazy sky that just kind of turn into sea lower down, without the least dividing line. So I stand up and fling off my clothes and go racing into the surf, all by my lonesome. Happiest day of my life."

What if someone had told him then that thirty years later he'd be dead of cancer, with that ocean morning the clearest picture left of him in Maggie's mind? The haze, the feel of warm air on bare skin, the shock of the first cold, briny-smelling breaker—Maggie might as well have been there herself. She was grateful suddenly for the sunlit clutter of billboards jogging past; even for the sticky vinyl upholstery plastered to the backs of her arms.

Ira said, "Who would she be marrying, I wonder."

“What?” Maggie asked. She felt a little dislocated.

“Fiona.”

“Oh,” Maggie said. “She didn’t say.”

Ira was trying to pass an oil truck. He tilted his head to the left, peering for oncoming traffic. After a moment he said, “I’m surprised she didn’t announce that too, while she was at it.”

“All she said was, she was marrying for security. She said she’d married for love once before and it hadn’t worked out.”

“Love!” Ira said. “She was seventeen years old. She didn’t know the first thing about love.”

Maggie looked over at him. What *was* the first thing about love? she wanted to ask. But he was muttering at the oil truck now.

“Maybe this time it’s an older man,” she said. “Someone sort of fatherly. If she’s marrying for security.”

“This guy knows perfectly well I’m trying to pass and he keeps spreading over into my lane,” Ira told her.

“Maybe she’s just getting married so she won’t have to go on working.”

“I didn’t know she worked.”

“She got a job, Ira. You know that! She told us that! She got a job at a beauty parlor when Leroy started nursery school.”

Ira honked at the oil truck.

“I don’t know why you bother sitting in a room with people if you can’t make an effort to listen,” she said.

Ira said, “Maggie, is something wrong with you today?”

“What do you mean?”

“How come you’re acting so irritable?”

“I’m not irritable,” she said. She pushed her sunglasses higher. She could see her own nose—the small, rounded tip emerging below the nosepiece.

“It’s Serena,” he said.

“Serena?”

“You’re upset about Serena and that’s why you’re snapping my head off.”

“Well, of course I’m upset,” Maggie said. “But I’m certainly not snapping your head off.”

“Yes, you are, and it’s also why you’re going on and on about Fiona when you haven’t given a thought to her in years.”

“That’s not true! How do you know how often I think about Fiona?”

Ira swung out around the oil truck at last.

By now, they had hit real country. Two men were splitting logs in a clearing, watched over by a gleaming black dog. The trees weren’t changing color yet, but they had that slightly off look that meant they were just about to. Maggie gazed at a weathered wooden fence that girdled a field. Funny how a picture stayed in your mind without your knowing it. Then you see the original and you think, Why! It was there all along, like a dream that comes drifting back in pieces halfway through the morning. That fence, for instance. So far they were retracing the road to Cartwheel and she’d seen that fence on her spy trips and unconsciously made it her own. “Rickrack,” she said to Ira.

“Hmm?”

“Don’t they call that kind of fence ‘rickrack’?”

He glanced over, but it was gone.

She had sat in her parked car some distance from Fiona’s mother’s house, watching for the teeniest, briefest glimpse of Leroy. Ira would have had a fit if he’d known what she was up to. This was back when Fiona first left, following a scene that Maggie never liked to recall. (She thought of it as That Awful Morning and made it vanish from her mind.) Oh, those days she’d been like a woman possessed; Leroy was not but a baby then, and what did Fiona know about babies? She’d always had Maggie to help her. So Maggie drove to Cartwheel on a free afternoon and parked the car and waited, and soon Fiona stepped forth with Leroy in her arms

and set off in the other direction, walking briskly, her long blonde hair swinging in sheets and the baby's face a bright little button on her shoulder. Maggie's heart bounded upward, as if she were in love. In a way, she *was* in love—with Leroy and Fiona both, and even with her own son as he had looked while clumsily cradling his daughter against his black leather jacket. But she didn't dare show herself—not yet, at least. Instead she drove home and told Jesse, "I went to Cartwheel today."

His face flew open. His eyes rested on her for one startled, startling instant before he looked away and said, "So?"

"I didn't talk to her, but I could tell she misses you. She was walking all alone with Leroy. Nobody else."

"Do you think I care about that?" Jesse asked. "What do you think *I* care?"

The next morning, though, he borrowed the car. Maggie was relieved. (He was a loving, gentle, warmhearted boy, with an uncanny gift for drawing people toward him. This would be settled in no time.) He stayed gone all day—she phoned hourly from work to check—and returned as she was cooking supper. "Well?" she asked.

"Well, what?" he said, and he climbed the stairs and shut himself in his room.

She realized then that it would take a little longer than she had expected.

Three times—on Leroy's first three birthdays—she and Ira had made conventional visits, prearranged grandparent visits with presents; but in Maggie's mind the real visits were her spy trips, which continued without her planning them as if long, invisible threads were pulling her northward. She would think she was heading to the supermarket but she'd find herself on Route One instead, already clutching her coat collar close around her face so as not to be recognized. She would hang out in Cartwheel's one playground, idly inspecting her fingernails next to the sandbox. She would lurk in the alley, wearing Ira's sister

Junie’s bright-red wig. At moments she imagined growing old at this. Maybe she would hire on as a crossing guard when Leroy started school. Maybe she’d pose as a Girl Scout leader, renting a little Girl Scout of her own if that was what was required. Maybe she’d serve as a chaperon for Leroy’s senior prom. Well. No point in getting carried away. She knew from Jesse’s dark silences, from the listlessness with which Fiona pushed the baby swing in the playground, that they surely couldn’t stay apart much longer. Could they?

Then one afternoon she shadowed Fiona’s mother as she wheeled Leroy’s stroller up to Main Street. Mrs. Stuckey was a slatternly, shapeless woman who smoked cigarettes. Maggie didn’t trust her as far as she could throw her, and rightly so, for look at what she did: parked Leroy outside the Cure-Boy Pharmacy and left her there while she went in. Maggie was horrified. Leroy could be kidnapped! She could be kidnapped by any passerby. Maggie approached the stroller and squatted down in front of it. “Honey?” she said. “Want to come away with your granny?” The child stared at her. She was, oh, eighteen months or so by then, and her face had seemed surprisingly grown up. Her legs had lost their infant chubbiness. Her eyes were the same milky blue as Fiona’s and slightly flat, blank, as if she didn’t know who Maggie was. “It’s Grandma,” Maggie said, but Leroy began squirming and craning all around. “Mom-Mom?” she said. Unmistakably, she was looking toward the door where Mrs. Stuckey had disappeared. Maggie stood up and walked away quickly. The rejection felt like a physical pain, like an actual wound to the chest. She didn’t make any more spy trips.

When she’d driven along here in springtime, the woods had been dotted with white dogwood blossoms. They had lightened the green hills the way a sprinkle of baby’s breath lightens a bouquet. And once she’d seen a small animal that was something other than the usual—not a rabbit or a raccoon but something slimmer, sleeker—and she had

braked sharply and adjusted the rearview mirror to study it as she left it behind. But it had already darted into the underbrush.

“Depend on Serena to make things difficult,” Ira was saying now. “She could have phoned as soon as Max died, but no, she waits till the very last minute. He dies on Wednesday, she calls late Friday night. Too late to contact Triple A about auto routes.” He frowned at the road ahead of him. “Um,” he said. “You don’t suppose she wants me to be a pallbearer or something, do you?”

“She didn’t mention it.”

“But she told you she needed our help.”

“I think she meant moral support,” Maggie said.

“Maybe pallbearing is moral support.”

“Wouldn’t that be physical support?”

“Well, maybe,” Ira said.

They sailed through a small town where groups of little shops broke up the pastures. Several woman stood next to a mailbox, talking. Maggie turned her head to watch them. She had a left-out, covetous feeling, as if they were people she knew.

“If she wants me to be a pallbearer I’m not dressed right,” Ira said.

“Certainly you’re dressed right.”

“I’m not wearing a black suit,” he said.

“You don’t own a black suit.”

“I’m in navy.”

“Navy’s fine.”

“Also I’ve got that trick back.”

She glanced at him.

“And it’s not as if I was ever very close to him,” he said.

Maggie reached over to the steering wheel and laid a hand on his. “Never mind,” she told him. “I bet anything she wants us just to be sitting there.”

He gave her a rueful grin, really no more than a tuck of the cheek.

How peculiar he was about death! He couldn't handle even minor illness and had found reasons to stay away from the hospital the time she had her appendix out; he claimed he'd caught a cold and might infect her. Whenever one of the children fell sick he'd pretended it wasn't happening. He'd told her she was imagining things. Any hint that he wouldn't live forever—when he had to deal with life insurance, for instance—made him grow set-faced and stubborn and resentful. Maggie, on the other hand, worried she *would* live forever—maybe because of all she'd seen at the home.

And if she were the one who died first, he would probably pretend that that hadn't happened, either. He would probably just go on about his business, whistling a tune the same as always.

What tune would he be whistling?

They were crossing the Susquehanna River now and the lacy, Victorian-looking superstructure of the Conowingo power plant soared on their right. Maggie rolled down her window and leaned out. She could hear the distant rush of water; she was almost breathing water, drinking in the spray that rose like smoke from far below the bridge.

"You know what just occurred to me," Ira said, raising his voice. "That artist woman, what's-her-name. She was bringing a bunch of paintings to the shop this morning."

Maggie closed her window again. She said, "Didn't you turn on your answering machine?"

"What good would that do? She'd already arranged to come in."

"Maybe we could stop off somewhere and phone her."

"I don't have her number with me," Ira said. Then he said, "Maybe we could phone Daisy and ask her to do it."

"Daisy would be at work by now," Maggie told him.

"Shoot."

Daisy floated into Maggie's mind, trim and pretty, with Ira's dark coloring and Maggie's small bones. "Oh, dear,"

Maggie said. “I hate to miss her last day at home.”

“She isn’t home anyhow; you just told me so.”

“She will be later on, though.”

“You’ll see plenty of her tomorrow,” Ira pointed out. “Good and plenty.”

Tomorrow they were driving Daisy to college—her freshman year, her first year away. Ira said, “All day cooped up in a car, you’ll be sick to death of her.”

“No, I won’t! I would never get sick of Daisy!”

“Tell me that tomorrow,” Ira said.

“Here’s a thought,” Maggie said. “Skip the reception.”

“What reception?”

“Or whatever they call it when you go to somebody’s house after the funeral.”

“Fine with me,” Ira said.

“That way we could still get home early even if we stopped off at Fiona’s.”

“Lord God, Maggie, are you still on that Fiona crap?”

“If the funeral were over by noon, say, and we went straight from there to Cartwheel—”

Ira swerved to the right, careening onto gravel. For a moment she thought it was some kind of tantrum. (She often had a sense of inching closer and closer to the edge of his temper.) But no, he’d pulled up at a gas station, an old-fashioned kind of place, white clapboard, with two men in overalls sitting on a bench in front. “Map,” he said briefly, getting out of the car.

Maggie rolled down her window and called after him, “See if they have a snack machine, will you?”

He waved and walked toward the bench.

Now that the car was stopped, the heat flowed through the roof like melting butter. She felt the top of her head grow hot; she imagined her hair turning from brown to some metallic color, brass or copper. She let her fingers dangle lazily out the window.

If she could just get Ira to Fiona's, the rest was easy. He was not immune, after all. He had held that child on his knee. He had answered Leroy's dovelike infant coos in the same respectful tone he'd used with his own babies. "Is that so. You don't say. Well, I believe now that you mention it I did hear something of the sort." Till Maggie (always so gullible) had had to ask, "What? What did she tell you?" Then he'd give her one of his wry, quizzical looks; and so would the baby, Maggie sometimes fancied.

No, he wasn't immune, and he would set eyes on Leroy and remember instantly how they were connected. People had to be reminded, that was all. The way the world was going now, it was so easy to forget. Fiona must have forgotten how much in love she had been at the start, how she had trailed after Jesse and that rock band of his. She must have put it out of her mind on purpose, for she was no more immune than Ira. Maggie had seen the way her face fell when they arrived for Leroy's first birthday and Jesse turned out not to be with them. It was pride at work now; injured pride. "But remember?" Maggie would ask her. "Remember those early days when all you cared about was being near each other? Remember how you'd walk everywhere together, each with a hand in the rear pocket of the other's jeans?" That had seemed sort of tacky at the time, but now it made her eyes fill with tears.

Oh, this whole day was so terribly sad, the kind of day when you realized that everyone eventually got lost from everyone else; and she had not written to Serena for over a year or even heard her voice till Serena phoned last night crying so hard she was garbling half her words. At this moment (letting a breeze ripple through her fingers like warm water), Maggie felt that the entire business of time's passing was more than she could bear. Serena, she wanted to say, just think: all those things we used to promise ourselves we'd never, ever do when we grew up. We promised we wouldn't mince when we walked barefoot. We

promised we wouldn’t lie out on the beach tanning instead of swimming, or swimming with our chins high so we wouldn’t wet our hairdos. We promised we wouldn’t wash the dishes right after supper because that would take us away from our husbands; remember that? How long since you saved the dishes till morning so you could be with Max? How long since Max even noticed that you didn’t?

Ira came toward her, opening out a map. Maggie removed her sunglasses and blotted her eyes on her sleeves. “Find what you wanted?” she called, and he said, “Oh …” and disappeared behind the map, still walking. The back of the paper was covered with photos of scenic attractions. He reached his side of the car, refolded the map, and got in. “Wish I could’ve called Triple A,” he told her. He started the engine.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry,” she said. “We’ve got loads of extra time.”

“Not really, Maggie. And look how the traffic is picking up. Every little old lady taking her weekend drive.”

A ridiculous remark; the traffic was mostly trucks. They pulled out in front of a moving van, behind a Buick and another oil truck, or perhaps the same truck they had passed a while back. Maggie replaced her sunglasses.

TRY JESUS, YOU WON’T REGRET IT, a billboard read. And BUBBA MCDUFF’S SCHOOL OF COSMETOLOGY. They entered Pennsylvania and the road grew smooth for a few hundred yards, like a good intention, before settling back to the same old scabby, stippled surface. The views were long and curved and green—a small child’s drawing of farm country. Distinct black cows grazed on the hillsides. BEGIN ODOMETER TEST, Maggie read. She sat up straighter. Almost immediately a tiny sign flashed by: 0.1 MI. She glanced at their odometer. “Point eight exactly,” she told Ira.

“Hmm?”

“I’m testing our odometer.”

Ira loosened the knot of his tie.

Two tenths of a mile. Three tenths. At four tenths, she felt they were falling behind. Maybe she was imagining things, but it seemed to her that the numeral lagged somewhat as it rolled upward. At five tenths, she was almost sure of it. “How long since you had this checked?” she asked Ira.

“Had what checked?”

“The odometer.”

“Well, never,” he said.

“Never! Not once? And you accuse *me* of poor auto maintenance!”

“Look at that,” Ira said. “Some ninety-year-old lady they’ve let out loose on the highway. Can’t even see above her steering wheel.”

He veered around the Buick, which meant that he completely bypassed one of the mileage signs. “Darn,” Maggie said. “You made me miss it.”

He didn’t respond. He didn’t even look sorry. She pinned her eyes far ahead, preparing for the seven tenths marker. When it appeared she glanced at the odometer and the numeral was just *creeping* up. It made her feel itchy and edgy. Oddly enough, though, the next numeral came more quickly. It might even have been too quick. Maggie said, “Oh-oh.”

“What’s the matter?”

“This is making me a nervous wreck,” she said. She was watching for the road sign and monitoring the odometer dial, both at once. The six rolled up on the dial several seconds ahead of the sign, she could swear. She tsked. Ira looked over at her. “Slow down,” she told him.

“Huh?”

“Slow down! I’m not sure we’re going to make it. See, here the seven comes, rolling up, up … and where’s the sign? Where’s the *sign*? Come on, sign! We’re losing! We’re too far ahead! We’re—”

The sign popped into view. “Ah,” she said. The seven settled into place at exactly the same instant, so precisely

that she almost heard it click.

"Whew!" she said. She sank back in her seat. "That was too close for comfort."

"They do set all our gauges at the factory, you know," Ira said.

"Sure, years and years ago," she told him. "I'm exhausted."

Ira said, "I wonder how long we should keep to Route One?"

"I feel I've been wrung through a wringer," Maggie said.

She made little plucking motions at the front of her dress.

Now collections of parked trucks and RVs appeared in clearings at random intervals—no humans around, no visible explanation for anybody's stopping there. Maggie had noticed this on her earlier trips and never understood it. Were the drivers off fishing, or hunting, or what? Did country people have some kind of secret life?

"Another thing is their banks," she told Ira. "All these towns have banks that look like itty-bitty brick houses, have you noticed? With yards around them, and flower beds. Would you put your faith in such a bank?"

"No reason not to."

"I just wouldn't feel my money was secure."

"Your vast wealth," Ira teased her.

"I mean it doesn't seem professional."

"Now, according to the map," he said, "we could stay on Route One a good deal farther up than Oxford. Serena had us cutting off at Oxford, if I heard you right, but … Check it for me, will you?"

Maggie took the map from the seat between them and opened it, one square at a time. She was hoping not to have to spread it out completely. Ira would get after her for refolding it wrong. "Oxford," she said. "Is that in Maryland or Pennsylvania?"

"It's in Pennsylvania, Maggie. Where Highway Ten leads off to the north."