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ANNE TYLER

If Morning Ever Comes

VINTAGE BOOKS

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I

WHEN BEN JOE Hawkes left home he gave his sister Susannah one used guitar, six shelves of *National Geographic*, a battered microscope, and a foot-high hourglass. All of these things he began to miss as soon as he hit New York. He considered writing home and asking for them – Susannah probably hadn't even listened when he gave them to her – but he figured she might laugh at him. His family was the kind that thought only children during their first summer at Scout camp should miss anything. So he kept quiet about what he missed and just dropped Susannah a postcard, with a picture on it of the UN building by night, asking if she had learned to play the guitar yet. And six weeks later he got a card back, but not the picture kind, postmarked Sandhill, N.C., and badly rained-on. He turned the card over and learned, from Susannah's jet-black, jerky script, that she had just changed to a job with the Sandhill School Library and was getting rich and could have her hair done every week now. She signed it "So long – S," and then there was a P.S. saying she was going to start learning to play the guitar tomorrow. Ben Joe read this over two or three times, although what she had said was perfectly clear: she had only just now remembered that the guitar existed. Probably she had got up in the midst of doing something else to drag it from his closet and twang the slack strings, but having discovered that she wasn't born knowing how to play and might have to work at it awhile she had dropped it again and drifted on to something else that came to mind. Ben Joe thought about starting up a whole *string* of cards – asking on the next one, for instance, whether that hourglass was still keeping time okay – until she

got snappy with him and packed everything up and sent it to New York. But Susannah was flighty, like almost all his sisters, and rarely finished anything she started reading even if it was as short as a postcard; he didn't think she would notice that he might be missing something. So he stopped the postcards and just wrote his regular letters after that, addressed to the family as a whole, asking about the health of his mother and all his sisters and saying he thought of them often.

By then it was November. He had left home late in August, just after his twenty-fifth birthday, to start law school at Columbia, and although he was doing well, even with three years of empty space behind him since college, he didn't like Columbia. On campus the wind up from the river cut clean through him no matter what he wore, and his classmates were all quick and sleek and left him nothing to say to them. They looked like the men who modeled Italian wool jackets in men's magazines; he plodded along beside them, thin and shivering, and tried to think about warm things. Nor did he like law; it was all memory work. The only reason he had chosen it was that it was at least practical, whereas the other ideas he had had were not, and practicality was a good thing when you headed up a family of six women. So all through September, October, and most of November he sat through Columbia's law classes and jiggled one foot across his knee and peeled his fingernails off.

On this particular Thursday the wind was so cold that Ben Joe became personally angry at it. He stepped out of the law building, pulling his collar up over his ears, and the wind suddenly hit him full in the face and left him gasping. That decided him; he changed direction and headed toward the apartment. Lately he had taken to spending the really cold days in bed with a murder mystery, and he was beginning to think he should have done that this morning.

On Broadway he stayed close to the buildings, hoping that there would be less wind there. He passed the brass nameplate on one of the concrete walls and for an instant saw his face reflected there, made yellow by the brass, with his mouth open and his jaw clenched and his teeth gnashed against the

cold. If it had been any other day he would have smiled, and maybe stopped to peer into the brass until the passers-by wondered what he was doing, but not today. Today he only hunched his gray topcoat around him more securely and kept going.

His apartment was five blocks from the campus, in a tiny dark old building with unbelievably high, sculptured ceilings. Opening the front door of it took all the strength he had. And all the way up the three flights of stairs he could smell what every family had eaten for the last day and a half – mainly bacon and burnt beans, he gathered. Ordinarily the smells made him feel a little sick, but today they seemed warm and comforting. He climbed more quickly, making each wooden step creak beneath his feet. By the time he was at his own door and digging through his pockets for the keys he was whistling under his breath, even though his face was stiff with cold.

"That you?" his roommate called from the kitchen.

"It's me."

He took the key out of the door and slammed the door shut behind him. Inside it was almost as cold as it was in the street; all it needed was the wind. The living room was taller than it was wide, and very dark, with high-backed stuffed furniture and long, narrow windows that rattled when a gust of wind blew. The mantel and the coffee tables were bare and dusty. There were none of the flower pots and photographs and china do-dads that he was used to from the houseful of women in which he had been raised, but a huge clutter of other objects lay around – newspapers, tossed-off jackets, textbooks, playing cards. In the middle of the dark wooden floor was a square scatter rug colored like a chessboard, and ridiculously tiny plastic chess pieces sat upon it in a middle-of-the-game confusion.

Ben Joe stripped his topcoat and his suit jacket off and threw them onto an easy chair. He untied his tie and stuffed it into the pocket of the jacket. From the daybed he picked up a crazy quilt from home and began swaddling himself in it, covering even his head and huddling himself tightly inside it.

"For Pete's sake," his roommate said from the kitchen doorway.

"Well, I'm cold." He backed up to the daybed and sat down. The bed was a wide one; he worked himself back until he was leaning against the wall and his legs were folded Indian fashion in front of him, and then he frowned.

"Forgot to take off my shoes," he said.

He patiently undid the quilt and untied his shoes. They fell to the floor with two dull thuds. With his cold feet pressed beneath the warmth of his legs, he reached again for the quilt and began pulling it around him.

"Hey, Jeremy," he said, "grab this corner, will you?"

His roommate left the doorway and came over, carrying a cup of coffee in one hand. "I've never seen the like," he said. "You wait till it's really winter. Which one?"

"The one in my left hand. There. Thanks."

He leaned back against the wall again and Jeremy drifted over to the window, slurping up his coffee as he went. He was younger than Ben Joe – twenty-one at the most, and an undergraduate – but Ben Joe liked him better than most of the other people he had met here. Maybe because he didn't have that sleek look either. He was from Maine, and wore sneakers and dungarees and dirty red Brewster jackets to class. His hair was so black it was startling; it gave him a wild look even when he smiled.

"I thought you had *two* classes on Thursdays," Jeremy said.

"I did. But I only went to the one. I got cold."

"Oh, pooh." He sat down on the edge of the window sill and swung one sneaker back and forth. "In Maine," he said, "we'd be swimming in this weather."

"In Sandhill we'd be sending for federal aid."

"Oh, now, don't you give me that."

He stood up and began tugging at the window. It screeched open; a gust of wind blew the newspaper's society section into Ben Joe's lap.

"Will you shut that *window!*" Ben Joe said.

"In a minute, in a minute. I'm trying to see what the thermometer says. Thirty-four. Thirty-four! Not even freezing."

"It's the wind," Ben Joe said.

The window slid shut again, leaving the apartment suddenly silent.

"Want to walk with me to the drugstore, Ben Joe?"

"Not me."

"I got to get a toothbrush."

"Nope."

Jeremy sighed and headed for the bedroom, twirling his empty coffee cup by the handle.

"Last night," he said as he walked, "I figured out the prettiest-sounding word in the English language. I did. And now I can't remember it."

"Hmm," Ben Joe said. He reached behind him to flick on the wall switch and smoothed out the newspaper in his lap. It was last Sunday's, but he hadn't got desperate enough to read the society section till now. It crackled dully on his knees, looking gray and smudgy under the flat light from the ceiling.

"I mean," Jeremy said from the bedroom, "usually you can think of a word that's *one* of the prettiest-sounding. But no, sir, this was *the* word. *Really* the word. I meant to tell this comp professor about it, that I see in the cafeteria. And then I woke up this morning and it was gone. It had an s in it, I think. An s."

"*That* should narrow it down," Ben Joe said. He grinned and tipped his head back so that it was resting against the wall.

"You want a date tonight, Ben Joe?"

"Who with?"

"This real cute freshman, has red hair and brown eyes, which is my favorite combination, and comes from, um—"

"Too young."

He opened the society section and folded it back, letting his arms emerge partway from the blanket.

"Thank you anyway," he called as an afterthought.

"Oh, that's okay." Jeremy was standing in the doorway now, with one end of a pillow in his teeth. "I've decided to clean the bedroom," he said. The words came out muffled but still intelligible. "I haven't changed my sheets in three weeks." He shook out a pillowcase, held it below the pillow, and

opened his mouth to let the pillow drop into the case. Then he tossed the pillow toward his bed and vanished from sight again.

Ben Joe started reading the society section, holding it upside-down in front of him. He had started learning to read when he was three, but his parents wanted him to wait until school age; they made him stand facing them when they read him bedtime stories, so that the book was turned the wrong way around. It wasn't until too late that they realized he was reading upside-down. Usually he read the right way now unless he was bored, and then upside-down words came to his mind more clearly. He held the newspaper at arm's length and frowned, studying an upside-down description of a golden anniversary where the couple had had another wedding performed all over again.

"What's this mess of lima beans doing on the floor of the closet?" Jeremy called.

"Oh, leave them. I'll take care of them."

"I know, but what are they *doing* there?"

"I forget. Hey, Jeremy, if you were having your golden anniversary would you have another wedding performed all over again?"

"Hell, no. I wouldn't have the first one."

On the next page there were ads to run through, detailed little line drawings of silver patterns and china patterns and ring sets. He yawned and then set to picking out a ring set, ending up with a large, oddly shaped diamond and a wedding band that was fine except for a line of dots at each edge that bothered him. Then he chose a silver pattern and a very expensive china pattern, platinum-rimmed, but he was already beginning to be tired of the game and abruptly he turned the paper right-side up, picked out a bride for himself that he considered most likely to meet all his requirements, and, with that finished, pushed the society news to the floor and stood up.

"Where's last Sunday's crossword?" he called.

"I already did it."

"You did it the week before, too."

"Well, I waited till *Wednesday*, for God's sake."

Ben Joe went into the bedroom. Jeremy was sitting on the floor with one of the bureau drawers beside him; he was slowly going through a stack of postcards and throwing some out but keeping most of them. The rest of the room was in chaos; Ben Joe's bed was unmade, Jeremy's was made but covered with the things he had decided to throw out, and there was a heap of dirty sheets on the floor between the two beds.

"Worse than it was before," Ben Joe said.

"I know. That's the trouble with cleaning up."

Ben Joe leaned his elbows on the dresser and looked into the mirror with his chin in his hands. The mirror was wavy and speckled, but he could at least recognize himself: his thin, flat-planed face, which almost never needed shaving and took on a sort of yellow look in the wintertime; his level gray eyes, so narrow that they looked as if he were constantly suspecting people; and his hair, dark yellow and hanging in shocks over his forehead. It was getting shaggy at the back and sides; he looked like an orphan. And walked like one, letting his shoulders hitch forward and burying his hands deeply in his pockets so that his arms could remain stiff and his elbows could dig into his sides. One of his sisters had once told him, meaning it kindly, that he was homely, all right, but *trustworthy*-looking; if people could do what they liked to strangers on the street, they would stop him and reach up to pat the top of his head. He sighed and straightened up and began moving around the room, kicking dust balls with his stockinged feet.

"I thought you were going out for a toothbrush," he said to Jeremy.

"I am. Soon as I finish this drawer. A red one."

"A red what?"

"*Toothbrush*." Jeremy threw a stack of postcards in the direction of the wastebasket. "I always buy a red toothbrush for the wintertime."

"Oh." Ben Joe sat down on the edge of his bed and frowned at the sheets on the floor. After a minute he said, "You ever seen one of those toothbrushes with a bird on the end? The kind that gives a soft little whistle when you blow on it?"

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"Sure. That's for kids, to make them want to brush their teeth."

"Well, I know it." He lay back crosswise on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "My sister had one of those once," he said. "My older sister, Joanne. She's away now. But she had a little pink toothbrush with a bird on the end, and it wasn't when she was a little girl, either. It was when she was in high school and had taken to wearing red dresses and gold hoop earrings and flinging that black hair of hers around. One night I was writing this philosophy paper. I came out of my room for a drink of water and I felt like hell – my mind all confused and tired but still popping off like a machine gun. And out of the bathroom just then came Joanne, not in red but in a little quilted white bathrobe, and sort of dreamily blowing the bird on her toothbrush. She didn't see me. But it was so damned *comforting*. I went to bed and slept like a rock, no more machine guns in my head."

He lay quiet for a minute, following the sculptured molding around the ceiling with his eyes.

"What was I saying?"

"About toothbrushes."

"Oh. Well, that was all."

He turned and rose up on one elbow to see what Jeremy was doing. Jeremy was reading all the postcards he had saved.

"Hey, Ben Joe," he said.

"Hmm."

"You want to hear something funny?"

"What."

"It's from this buddy of mine that goes to college out west, with a picture of this gorge, real deep down with a river at the bottom. Says, 'This gorge is habit-forming. Threw a bowling ball down it to hear how it sounded and it sounded so good I moved on to bigger and better things and last night me and some buddies threw a piano down it.' A *piano*. What do you guess it looked like when it hit? Ben Joe?"

Ben Joe looked up.

"Ah, you're not listening," said Jeremy. He put the postcard back in the drawer and moved on to the next one.

Ben Joe sat up, running his fingers through his hair. "What time is it?" he asked.

"I don't know. Eleven or so."

He reached over and pulled open the top drawer of his own bureau. At the right was a stack of letters; he pulled the top one out, looked at it to make sure it had been signed by his sister Jenny (she was the official family letter writer), and then lay back down, holding the letter over his head, right-side up, to read it:

Dear Ben Joe:

We received yours of the 12th. Yes, of course we are well. I don't know why you keep asking us, since you know as well as we do that the last time any of us was in the hospital was five years ago when Susannah had all four wisdom teeth pulled at once. Mama says to tell you you worry too much. We are getting along beautifully & hope you are too.

Financially things are going smoothly. Next month both of the twins are getting raises at the bank, but Lisa is getting \$6 more a month than Jane, which make family relationships kind of tense. Tessie is taking drawing lessons after school now for \$2 a lesson, which I think we can afford, & the only extra expense this month has been the caves pipe falling down from the roof outside Tessie's & my window due to Tessie's standing on it. Tessie didn't, tho. Fall, I mean. I'll never know why.

I wish you would write a letter to the family suggesting that we go back to a policy of my doing the grocery shopping. Specially since it was me you left in charge of the money. Gram has been doing it lately & the results are disaster. She gets anything she feels like, minced clams & pickled artichoke hearts & pig's feet & when I ask where are the meat & potatoes she says it's time we had a little change around here. She's ruining us.

Enclosed is next month's check for your expenses, etc. I hope you will remember to send a receipt this time as it makes my bookkeeping neater.

Sincerely,
Jennifer.

Enc.

Ben Joe folded the letter and sat up again. "I wish someone besides Jenny would do the letter writing in my family," he said.

"Why?"

"I don't know." He began walking around the room with his hands in his pockets. "You never know what's going on, exactly. Just about the dratted eaves pipes and stuff."

"The what?" Jeremy sat back and stared, and when Ben Joe didn't answer, he said, "Oh, now, are you getting started on your family again? What you worried about?"

Ben Joe stopped in front of the window and looked out. There was a venetian blind between him and the outdoors; the buildings across from him were divided into dozens of horizontal strips.

"Someone's lost a red balloon," he said. "They must've lost it out a window, it's flying so high."

"Maybe it's a gas balloon."

"Maybe. What bothers me is, sometimes I think my family doesn't know *when* to get upset – the most amazing things happen and they forget to even tell me. I try to keep quiet, but all the time I'm thinking, 'I wonder what's going on back there. I wonder if maybe I shouldn't just chuck everything and go on back and see for myself, set my mind at rest if nothing . . .'"

He was sitting on Jeremy's bed now, and reaching for the phone.

"You going to call home?" Jeremy asked.

"I reckon."

"You want me to get out?"

"Nah, that's all right— Operator, I want Sandhill, North Carolina, two four oh—"

"You got a Southern accent," she said. She was snappy and cross, with a New York twang to her voice. "I can't tell if you said 'four' or 'five'; you don't—"

"I haven't got one, either. I said 'two, four, oh—'"

"Yes you do. You said 'Ah.' 'Ah haven't got—'"

"I did not. My mother's a Northerner, even."

"Number, please."

"Two four oh, six seven five four. If I had an accent I'd say 'foh.' No 'r.' But I said the 'r.'"

"And *your* number, please."

"Academy four, six five five nine."

"Station to station?"

"Yes'm."

The telephone had a familiar plastic smell; the receiver was warm and already a little damp in his hand. He hated using the telephone. The thought of speaking to someone, and listening to him, without seeing him was as panicky as not being able to breathe. How could he tell anything about a person if he couldn't see him? Sometimes he thought something must be wrong with his ears; what he heard told him almost nothing. And usually he read too much harshness into a voice. He could hang up a telephone receiver and feel hurt and bewildered for days and then find out, weeks later when he asked what he had done to annoy them, that they were just talking above the noise from a TV set. So now, to make it easier for himself, he tried to picture exactly what was going on at the other end. He pictured the house in Sandhill at eleven o'clock on a Thursday morning, with the autumn sun shining palely through the long bay windows in the living room. His sisters would all be at work, he guessed, except for Tessie, who was still in grade school. Or was it her lunch hour? No, too early. That left only his mother, and maybe even she would be gone; she worked part time at a book store. The phone rang twice. He waited, tensed against the pillows.

"Hello?" his mother said. He could tell her from his sisters, although their voices were almost the same, by that way she had of seeming to expect the worst when she answered the telephone.

"Hi," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's me. Ben Joe."

"Ben Joe! What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I called to see how you were."

"Didn't you get our last letter?"

"Well, yes. I guess I did. The one about the eaves pipe falling down?"

"I think that was it. Did you get it?"

"Yes, I got it."

"Oh. I thought maybe you were worried because you hadn't heard from us."