ALSO BY ANNE TYLER

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ANNE TYLER

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1. Common Knowledge

Anyone in the neighborhood could tell you how Michael and Pauline first met.

It happened on a Monday afternoon early in December of 1941. St. Cassian was its usual poky self that day—a street of narrow East Baltimore row houses, carefully kept little homes intermingled with shops no bigger than small parlors. The Golka twins, identically kerchiefed, compared cake rouges through the window of Sweda's Drugs. Mrs. Pozniak stepped out of the hardware store with a tiny brown paper bag that jingled. Mr. Kostka's Model-B Ford puttered past, followed by a stranger's sleekly swishing Chrysler Airstream and then by Ernie Moskowicz on the butcher's battered delivery bike.

In Anton's Grocery—a dim, cram-packed cubbyhole with an L-shaped wooden counter and shelves that reached the low ceiling—Michael's mother wrapped two tins of peas for Mrs. Brunek. She tied them up tightly and handed them over without a smile, without a "Come back soon" or a "Nice to see you." (Mrs. Anton had had a hard life.) One of Mrs. Brunek's boys—Carl? Paul? Peter? they all looked so much alike—pressed his nose to the glass of the penny-candy display. A floorboard creaked near the cereals, but that was just the bones of the elderly building settling deeper into the ground.

Michael was shelving Woodbury's soap bars behind the longer,

left-hand section of the counter. He was twenty at the time, a tall young man in ill-fitting clothes, his hair very black and cut too short, his face a shade too thin, with that dark kind of whiskers that always showed no matter how often he shaved. He was stacking the soap in a pyramid, a base of five topped by four, topped by three . . . although his mother had announced, more than once, that she preferred a more compact, less creative arrangement.

Then, *tinkle, tinkle!* and *wham!* and what seemed at first glance a torrent of young women exploded through the door. They brought a gust of cold air with them and the smell of auto exhaust. "Help us!" Wanda Bryk shrilled. Her best friend, Katie Vilna, had her arm around an unfamiliar girl in a red coat, and another girl pressed a handkerchief to the red-coated girl's right temple. "She's been hurt! She needs first aid!" Wanda cried.

Michael stopped his shelving. Mrs. Brunek clapped a hand to her cheek, and Carl or Paul or Peter drew in a whistle of a breath. But Mrs. Anton did not so much as blink. "Why bring her here?" she asked. "Take her to the drugstore."

"The drugstore's closed," Katie told her.

"Closed?"

"It says so on the door. Mr. Sweda's joined the Coast Guard."

"He's done *what?*"

The girl in the red coat was very pretty, despite the trickle of blood running past one ear. She was taller than the two neighborhood girls but slender, more slightly built, with a leafy cap of dark-blond hair and an upper lip that rose in two little points so sharp they might have been drawn with a pen. Michael came out from behind the counter to take a closer look at her. "What happened?" he asked her—only her, gazing at her intently.

"Get her a Band-Aid! Get iodine!" Wanda Bryk commanded. She had gone through grade school with Michael. She seemed to feel she could boss him around.

The girl said, "I jumped off a streetcar."

Her voice was low and husky, a shock after Wanda's thin violin notes. Her eyes were the purple-blue color of pansies. Michael swallowed.

"A parade's begun on Dubrowski Street," Katie was telling the others. "All six of the Szapp boys are enlisting, haven't you heard? And a couple of their friends besides. They've got this banner—'Watch out, Japs! Here come the Szapps!'—and everyone's seeing them off. They've gathered such a crowd that the traffic can't hardly get through. So Pauline here—she was heading home from work; places are closing early—what does she do? Jumps off a speeding streetcar to join in."

The streetcar couldn't have been speeding all that fast, if traffic was clogged, but nobody pointed that out. Mrs. Brunek gave a sympathetic murmur. Carl or Paul or Peter said, "Can *I* go, Mama? Can I? Can I go watch the parade?"

"I just thought we should try and support our boys," Pauline told Michael.

He swallowed again. He said, "Well, of course."

"You're not going to help our boys any knocking yourself silly," the girl with the handkerchief said. From her tolerant tone, you could see that she and Pauline were friends, although she was less attractive—a brown-haired girl with a calm expression and eyebrows so long and level that she seemed lacking in emotion.

"We think she hit her head against a lamppost," Wanda said, "but nobody could be sure in all the fuss. She landed in our laps, just about, with Anna here a ways behind her. I said, 'Jeepers! Are you okay?' Well, *somebody* had to do *something;* we couldn't just let her bleed to death. Don't you people have Band-Aids?"

"This place is not a pharmacy," Mrs. Anton said. And then, pursuing an obvious connection, "Whatever got into Nick Sweda? He must be thirty-five if he's a day!"

Michael, meanwhile, had turned away from Pauline to join his mother behind the counter—the shorter, end section of the counter where the cash register stood. He bent down, briefly disappeared, and emerged with a cigar box. "Bandages," he explained.

Not Band-Aids, but old-fashioned cotton batting rolled in dark-blue tissue the exact shade of Pauline's eyes, and a spool of white adhesive tape, and an oxblood-colored bottle of iodine. Wanda stepped forward to take them; but no, Michael unrolled the cotton himself

and tore a wad from one corner. He soaked the wad with iodine and came back to stand in front of Pauline. "Let me see," he said.

There was a reverent, alert silence, as if everyone understood that this moment was significant—even the girl with the handkerchief, the one Wanda had called Anna, although Anna could not have known that Michael Anton was ordinarily the most reserved boy in the parish. She removed the handkerchief from Pauline's temple. Michael pried away a petal of Pauline's hair and started dabbing with the cotton wad. Pauline held very still.

The wound, it seemed, was a two-inch red line, long but not deep, already closing. "Ah," Mrs. Brunek said. "No need for stitches."

"We can't be sure of that!" Wanda cried, unwilling to let go of the drama.

But Michael said, "She'll be fine," and he tore off a new wad of cotton. He plastered it to Pauline's temple with a crisscross of adhesive tape.

Now she looked like a fight victim in a comic strip. As if she knew that, she laughed. It turned out she had a dimple in each cheek. "Thanks very much," she told him. "Come and watch the parade with us."

He said, "All right."

Just that easily.

"Can I come too?" the Brunek boy asked. "Can I, Mama? Please?"

Mrs. Brunek said, "Ssh."

"But who will help with the store?" Mrs. Anton asked Michael.

As if he hadn't heard her, he turned to take his jacket from the coat tree in the corner. It was a schoolboy kind of jacket—a big, rough plaid in shades of gray and charcoal. He shrugged himself into it, leaving it unbuttoned. "Ready?" he asked the girls.

The others watched after him—his mother and Mrs. Brunek, and Carl or Paul or Peter, and little old Miss Pelowski, who chanced to be approaching just as Michael and the four girls came barreling out the door. "What . . . ?" Miss Pelowski asked. "What on earth . . . ? Where . . . ?"

Michael didn't even slow down. He was halfway up the block

now, with three girls trailing him and a fourth one at his side. She clung to the crook of his left arm and skimmed along next to him in her brilliant red coat.

Even then, Miss Pelowski said later, she had known that he was a goner.

"Parade" was too formal a word, really, for the commotion on Dubrowski Street. It was true that several dozen young men were walking down the center of the pavement, but they were still in civilian clothes and they made no attempt to keep in step. The older of John Piazy's sons wore John's sailor cap from the Great War. Another boy, name unknown, had flung a regulation Army blanket around his shoulders like a cape. It was a shabby, straggly, unkempt little regiment, their faces chapped, their noses running in the cold.

Even so, people were enthusiastic. They waved homemade signs and American flags and the front page of the *Baltimore Sun.* They cheered at speeches—any speeches, any rousing phrases shouted over their heads. "You'll be home by New Year's, boys!" a man in earmuffs called, and "New Year's Day! Hurray!" zigzagged through the crowd.

When Michael Anton showed up with four girls, everybody assumed he was enlisting too. "Go get 'em, Michael!" someone shouted. Though John Piazy's wife said, "Ah, no. It would be the death of his mother, poor soul, with all she's had to suffer."

One of the four girls, the one in red, asked, "*Will* you be going, Michael?" An outsider, she was, but very easy on the eyes. The red of her coat brought out the natural glow of her skin, and a bandage on her temple made her look madcap and rakish. No wonder Michael gave her a long, considering stare before he spoke.

"Well," he said finally, and then he kind of hitched up his shoulders. "Well, naturally I will be!" he said.

A ragged cheer rang out from everyone standing nearby, and another of the girls—Wanda Bryk, in fact—pushed him forward until he had merged with the young men in the street. Leo Kazmerow walked on his left; the four girls scurried along the sidewalk

on his right. "We love you, Michael!" Wanda cried, and Katie Vilna called, "Come back soon!" as if he were embarking for the trenches that very instant.

Then Michael was forgotten. He was swept away, and other young men replaced him: Davey Witt, Joe Dobek, Joey Serge. "You go show those Japs what we're made of!" Davey's father was shouting. For after all, a man was saying, who could tell when they'd have another chance to get even over Poland? An old woman was crying. John Piazy was telling everybody that neither one of his sons knew the meaning of the word "fear." And several people were starting in on the where-were-you-when-you-heard discussion. One had not heard till that morning; he'd been burying his mother. One had heard first thing, the first announcement on the radio, but had dismissed it as another Orson Welles hoax. And one, a woman, had been soaking in the bathtub when her husband knocked on the door. "You're never going to believe this," he'd called. "I just sat there," she said. "I just sat and sat. I sat until the water got cold."

Wanda Bryk returned with Katie Vilna and the brown-haired girl, but not the girl in red. The girl in red had vanished. It seemed she'd marched off to war with Michael Anton, somebody said.

They did all notice—those in the crowd who knew Michael. It was enough of a surprise so they noticed, and remarked to each other, and remembered for some time afterward.

Word got out, the next day, that Leo Kazmerow had been rejected because he was color-blind. Color-blind! people said. What did color have to do with fighting for your country? Unless maybe he couldn't recognize the color of someone's uniform. If he was aiming his gun in battle, say. But everyone agreed that there were ways to get around that. Put him on a ship! Sit him behind a cannon and show him where to shoot!

This conversation took place in Anton's Grocery. Mrs. Anton was answering the phone, but as soon as she hung up, someone asked, "And what's the news of Michael, Mrs. Anton?"

"News?" she said.

"Has he left yet?"

"Oh, Michael's not going anyplace," she said.

They slid their eyes toward each other—Mrs. Pozniak, Mrs. Kowalski, and one of Mrs. Kowalski's daughters. But nobody wanted to argue. Mrs. Anton had lost her husband in 1935, and then her firstborn son two years later—handsome, charming Danny Anton, dead of a progressive disease that took him away inch by inch and muscle by muscle. Mrs. Anton had been a changed woman ever since, and who could blame her?

Mrs. Pozniak asked for Cream of Wheat, Fels Naphtha, and a tin of Heinz baked beans. Mrs. Anton set each item flatly on the counter. She was a straight-faced woman, gray all over. Not just her hair was gray but her dull, slack skin and her lusterless eyes and her stretched-out, pilled, man's sweater worn over a gingham dress. She had a way of looking past her customers' shoulders while she dealt with them, as if she hoped someone else would show up, someone less disappointing.

Then the bell on the door tinkled and in burst a girl in a red coat, carrying a tissue-wrapped parcel. "Mrs. Anton?" she said. "Do you remember me?"

Mrs. Pozniak hadn't completed her order. She turned, one finger poised on her grocery list, and opened her mouth to protest.

"Pauline Barclay," the girl explained. "I cut my forehead and your son gave me a bandage. I've knitted him a scarf. I hope I'm not too late."

"Too late for what?" Mrs. Anton asked.

"Has Michael left for the front yet?"

"The front?"

Mrs. Anton pronounced the word with a little halt, a little different sound to the *o*. It seemed possible that she was picturing the front of a room or a piece of furniture.

Before Pauline could elaborate, the door tinkled open again and here came Michael in his shaggy plaid jacket. He must have caught sight of Pauline from the street; you could tell by his artificial start of surprise. "Oh! Pauline! It's you!" he said. (He'd never have made an actor.)

"I knitted you a warm scarf," she told him. She held up her parcel in both gloved hands; she tilted her fine-boned, delicate face. The little store was so crowded by now that they were standing almost nose to nose.

Michael said, "For me?"

"To wear to the front."

He sent a quick glance toward his mother. Then he took hold of Pauline's elbow. "Let's go get a Coke," he said.

"Oh, why, that would be—"

"Michael? We have another telephone order," Mrs. Anton said.

But he said, "I'll be back soon," and he guided Pauline out the door.

They left behind a larger space than they had occupied, somehow.

Mrs. Pozniak paused for a moment longer, just in case Mrs. Anton had something interesting to say. She didn't, though. She was staring grimly after her son, one hand tracing the Cream of Wheat box as if to square off its corners.

Mrs. Pozniak cleared her throat and asked for a bottle of molasses.

The parlor windows on St. Cassian Street developed a military theme, the Blessed Virgins and china poodles and silk flowers replaced overnight by American flags, swoops of red, white, and blue bunting, and grade-school geography books laid open to maps of Europe. Although in some cases, the religious items stayed put. Mrs. Szapp's bleached-out Palm Sunday palm fronds, for instance, remained in place even after a banner bearing six satin stars was tacked to the wooden sash. And why not? You need all the intervention you can get, when every last one of your sons is off risking his life for his country.

Mr. Kostka asked Michael what branch of the service he'd joined. This was in Sweda's Drugs, which had reopened under the management of Mr. Sweda's brother-in-law. Michael and Pauline were sitting at one of the marble-topped tables; they'd been observed together often over the past few days. Michael said, "The Army," and Mr. Kostka said, "Is that a fact! I'd have thought the Navy."

"Yes, but I get seasick," Michael told him.

Mr. Kostka said, "Well, young fellow, the Army's not going to ship you over by motorcar, you know."

Michael got a sort of startled look.

"And when do you leave for boot camp?" Mr. Kostka inquired.

Michael paused. Then, "Monday," he said.

"Monday!" By now it was Saturday. "Has your mother lined up any help at the store?"

Oh, sneaky; very sneaky. Everybody knew that Mrs. Anton had no idea Michael had enlisted. But who was going to tell her? Even Mrs. Zack, famous for interfering, claimed she hadn't the heart. They were all waiting for Michael to do it; but here he sat, sipping Coke with Pauline, and the only thing he would say was "I'm sure she'll find someone or other."

Pauline was wearing red again. Red seemed to be her color. A red sweater over a crisp white shirt with a rounded collar. It was known by now that she came from a neighborhood north of Eastern Avenue; that she wasn't even Catholic; that she worked as a receptionist in her father's realty office. *How* this was known was through Wanda Bryk, who had somehow become Pauline's new best friend. It was Wanda who reported that Pauline was just the nicest person imaginable, and so much fun! So vivacious! Just always up to some mischief. But others had their reservations. Those seated at the soda fountain, now. You think they weren't cocking their ears to hear what foolish talk she might be filling Michael's head with? Not to mention they could see her in the long mirror behind the counter. They saw how she tucked her face down, all dimpling and demure, fingers toying coquettishly with the straw in her Coca-Cola. They heard her murmuring that she wouldn't be able to sleep a wink nights, fearing for his safety. What right did she have to fear for his safety? She barely even knew him! Michael was one of their own, one of the neighborhood favorites, although not till now considered the romantic type. (Over the past few days a number of girls, Katie Vilna and several others, had started wondering if he might possess some unsuspected qualities.)

Old Miss Jakubek, drinking seltzer at the counter with Miss Pelowski, reported that the evening before, she had gone up to Pauline at the movies and told her she looked like Deanna Durbin. "Well, she

does, in a way," she defended herself. "I know she's a blonde, but she does have that, oh, that dentable soft skin. But what did she say? 'Deanna Durbin!' she said. 'That's just not true! I look like me! I don't look *like* anyone!' "

"Tsk, tsk," Miss Pelowski sympathized. "You were only trying to be nice."

"I myself would love it if someone told me I looked like Deanna Durbin."

Miss Pelowski drew back on her stool and studied Miss Jakubek. "Well, you do, around the chin, a little," she said.

"His poor, poor mother, is all I can think. And the girl is nothing; no nationality. Not even Ukrainian; not even Italian! Italian I might be able to handle. But 'Barclay'! She and Michael don't have the least little thing in common."

"It's like *Romeo and Juliet,*" Miss Pelowski said.

Both women thought for a moment. Then they glanced toward the mirror again. They saw that Pauline was crying; that Michael was leaning across the table to cup her chrysanthemum head in both hands.

"They do seem very much in love," Miss Jakubek said.

That night there was a huge going-away party for Jerry Kowalski. Depend on the Kowalskis to make more of a fuss than other people. Other people had been seeing their boys off all week with no more than a nice family dinner, but the Kowalskis rented the Sons of Warsaw Fellowship Hall and hired Lenny Zee and his Dulcetones to play. Mrs. Kowalski and her mother cooked for days; giant kegs of beer were rolled in. The whole of St. Cassian's Church was invited, as well as a few from St. Stan.

And of course, everyone came. Even babies and small children; even Mr. Zynda in his cane-seated wooden wheelchair. Mrs. Anton arrived in a ruffly blouse and ribbon-trimmed dirndl skirt that made her look grayer than ever, and Michael wore a pinchy suit that might have been his father's. His raw, bare wrist bones poked forth from the sleeves. A white flake of toilet paper clung to a nick on his chin.

But where was Pauline?

Most certainly she had been invited, at least by implication. "Feel free to bring a date," Mrs. Kowalski had told Michael—in his mother's presence, no less. (Oh, Mrs. Kowalski was widely known to be a bit of an imp.) But the only girls here were neighborhood girls, and when the first polka started sawing away, it was Katie Vilna who came over to Michael and pulled him onto the dance floor. She was the forward one of the group. She kept tight hold of his hand even when he resisted. Eventually, he gave in and began awkwardly hippity-hopping, every now and then glancing toward the door as if he were expecting somebody.

The Fellowship Hall was a warehouse-like building with splintery floors and metal rafters and naked overhead lightbulbs. Card tables draped with hand-stitched heirloom linens lined the far wall, and it was here that the older women gathered, scrutinizing Mrs. Kowalski's pierogi and finickily readjusting the sprigs of parsley garnish after one or another of the men had passed through loading his plate. When they stood back to watch the dancing, they tended to clasp their hands on their stomachs as if folding them beneath aprons, even though not a one of them actually wore an apron. They commented on Grandfather Kowalski's sprightly step, on the evident chill between the Wysockis (newlyweds), and—of course—on Katie Vilna's unbelievable nerve. "I swear, she has no shame," Mrs. Golka said. "I'd die if one of *my* girls was to chase a boy that way."

"Fine chance she has, anyhow, with that Pauline person in the picture."

"Where *is* Pauline, though? Wouldn't you think she would be here?"

"She's not coming," Wanda announced.

Wanda had approached unnoticed, her footsteps drowned out by the music. (Otherwise, the women never would have said what they did about Katie.) She forked a kielbasa onto her plate. She said, "Pauline's miffed that Michael wouldn't call for her."

"Call for her?"

"At her folks' house."

"But why—?"