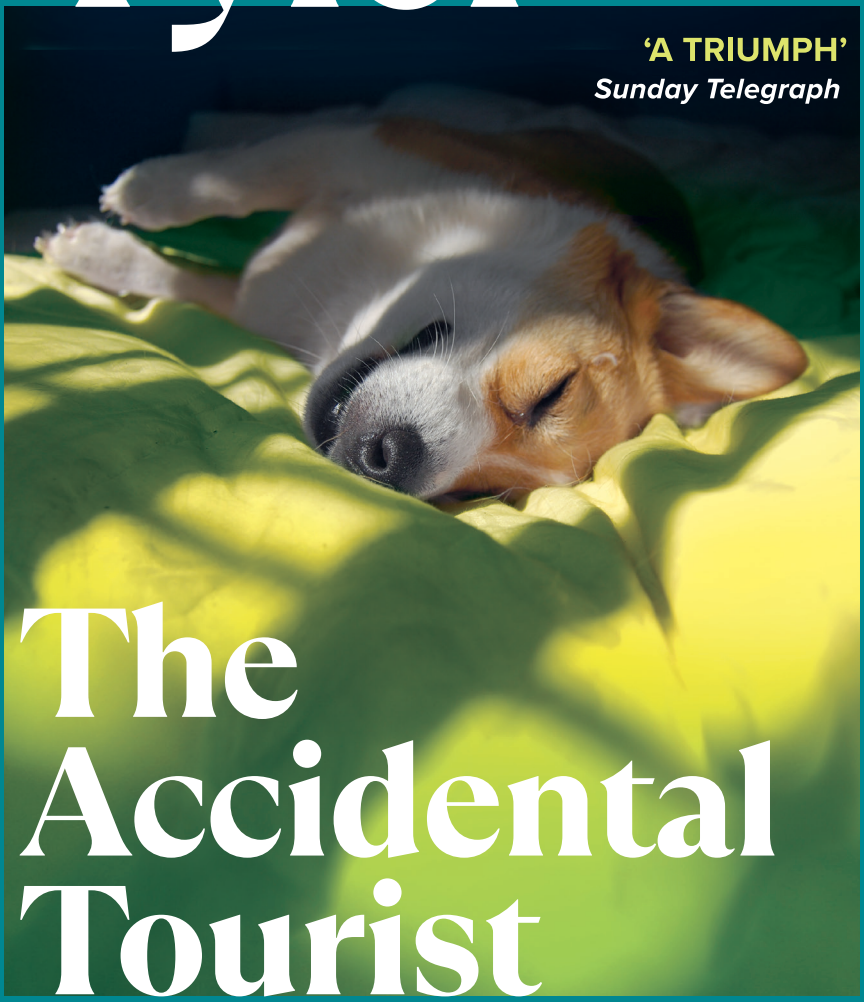
THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

Anne Tyler



'A TRIUMPH'
Sunday Telegraph

The Accidental Tourist

ANNE TYLER

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1941 and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. Her bestselling novels include *Breathing Lessons*, *The Accidental Tourist*, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, *Ladder of Years*, *Back When We Were Grown-Ups*, *Digging to America*, *A Spool of Blue Thread*, *Clock Dance* and *Redhead by the Side of the Road*.

In 1989 she won the Pulitzer Prize; in 1994 she was nominated by Roddy Doyle and Nick Hornby as 'the greatest novelist writing in English'; and in 2012 she received the Sunday Times Award for Literary Excellence. In 2015 *A Spool of Blue Thread* was shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction and the Booker Prize; and in 2020 *Redhead by the Side of the Road* was longlisted for the Booker Prize.

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1

They were supposed to stay at the beach a week, but neither of them had the heart for it and they decided to come back early. Macon drove. Sarah sat next to him, leaning her head against the side window. Chips of cloudy sky showed through her tangled brown curls.

Macon wore a formal summer suit, his traveling suit—much more logical for traveling than jeans, he always said. Jeans had those stiff, hard seams and those rivets. Sarah wore a strapless terry beach dress. They might have been returning from two entirely different trips. Sarah had a tan but Macon didn't. He was a tall, pale, gray-eyed man, with straight fair hair cut close to his head, and his skin was that thin kind that easily burns. He'd kept away from the sun during the middle part of every day.

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Just past the start of the divided highway, the sky grew almost black and several enormous drops spattered the windshield. Sarah sat up straight. 'Let's hope it doesn't rain,' she said.

'I don't mind a little rain,' Macon said.

Sarah sat back again, but she kept her eyes on the road.

It was a Thursday morning. There wasn't much traffic. They passed a pickup truck, then a van all covered with stickers from a hundred scenic attractions. The drops on the windshield grew closer together. Macon switched his wipers on. Tick-*swoosh*, they went—a lulling sound; and there was a gentle patter on the roof. Every now and then a gust of wind blew up. Rain flattened the long, pale grass at the sides of the road. It slanted across the boat lots, lumberyards, and discount furniture outlets, which already had a darkened look as if here it might have been raining for some time.

'Can you see all right?' Sarah asked.

'Of course,' Macon said. 'This is nothing.'

They arrived behind a trailer truck whose rear wheels sent out arcs of spray. Macon swung to the left and passed. There was a moment of watery blindness till the truck had dropped behind. Sarah gripped the dashboard with one hand.

'I don't know how you can see to drive,' she said.

'Maybe you should put on your glasses.'

'Putting on my glasses would help you to see?'

'Not me; you,' Macon said. 'You're focused on the windshield instead of the road.'

Sarah continued to grip the dashboard. She had a broad, smooth face that gave an impression of calm, but if you looked closely you'd notice the tension at the corners of her eyes.

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The car drew in around them like a room. Their breaths fogged the windows. Earlier the air conditioner had been running and now some artificial chill remained, quickly turning dank, carrying with it the smell of mildew. They shot through an underpass. The rain stopped completely for one blank, startling second. Sarah gave a little gasp of relief, but even before it was uttered, the hammering on the roof resumed. She turned and gazed back longingly at the underpass. Macon sped ahead, with his hands relaxed on the wheel.

'Did you notice that boy with the motorcycle?' Sarah asked. She had to raise her voice; a steady, insistent roaring sound engulfed them.

'What boy?'

'He was parked beneath the underpass.'

'It's crazy to ride a motorcycle on a day like today,' Macon said. 'Crazy to ride one any day. You're so exposed to the elements.'

'We could do that,' Sarah said. 'Stop and wait it out.'

'Sarah, if I felt we were in the slightest danger I'd have pulled over long ago.'

'Well, I don't know that you would have,' Sarah said.

They passed a field where the rain seemed to fall in sheets, layers and layers of rain beating down the cornstalks, flooding the rutted soil. Great lashings of water flung themselves at the windshield. Macon switched his wiper blades to high.

'I don't know that you really care that much,' Sarah said. 'Do you.'

Macon said, 'Care?'

'I said to you the other day, I said, "Macon, now that Ethan's

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dead I sometimes wonder if there's any point to life." Do you remember what you answered?'

'Well, not offhand,' Macon said.

'You said, "Honey, to tell the truth, it never seemed to me there was all that much point to begin with." Those were your exact words.'

'Um . . .'

'And you don't even know what was wrong with that.'

'No, I guess I don't,' Macon said.

He passed a line of cars that had parked at the side of the road, their windows opaque, their gleaming surfaces bouncing back the rain in shallow explosions. One car was slightly tipped, as if about to fall into the muddy torrent that churned and raced in the gully. Macon kept a steady speed.

'You're not a comfort, Macon,' Sarah said.

'Honey, I'm trying to be.'

'You just go on your same old way like before. Your little routines and rituals, depressing habits, day after day. No comfort at all.'

'Shouldn't I need comfort too?' Macon asked. 'You're not the only one, Sarah. I don't know why you feel it's your loss alone.'

'Well, I just do, sometimes,' Sarah said.

They were quiet a moment. A wide lake, it seemed, in the center of the highway crashed against the underside of the car and slammed it to the right. Macon pumped his brakes and drove on.

'This rain, for instance,' Sarah said. 'You know it makes me nervous. What harm would it do to wait it out? You'd be showing some concern. You'd be telling me we're in this together.'

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Macon peered through the windshield, which was streaming so that it seemed marbled. He said, 'I've got a system, Sarah. You know I drive according to a system.'

'You and your systems!'

'Also,' he said, 'if you don't see any point to life, I can't figure why a rainstorm would make you nervous.'

Sarah slumped in her seat.

'Will you look at that!' he said. 'A mobile home's washed clear across that trailer park.'

'Macon, I want a divorce,' Sarah told him.

Macon braked and glanced over at her. 'What?' he said. The car swerved. He had to face forward again. 'What did I say?' he asked. 'What did it mean?'

'I just can't live with you anymore,' Sarah said.

Macon went on watching the road, but his nose seemed sharper and whiter, as if the skin of his face had been pulled tight. He cleared his throat. He said, 'Honey. Listen. It's been a hard year. We've had a hard time. People who lose a child often feel this way; everybody says so; everybody says it's a terrible strain on a marriage—'

'I'd like to find a place of my own as soon as we get back,' Sarah told him.

'Place of your own,' Macon echoed, but he spoke so softly, and the rain beat so loudly on the roof, it looked as if he were only moving his lips. 'Well,' he said. 'All right. If that's what you really want.'

'You can keep the house,' Sarah said. 'You never did like moving.'

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For some reason, it was this that made her finally break down. She turned away sharply. Macon switched his right blinker on. He pulled into a Texaco station, parked beneath the overhang, and cut off the engine. Then he started rubbing his knees with his palms. Sarah huddled in her corner. The only sound was the drumming of rain on the overhang far above them.

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2

After his wife left him, Macon had thought the house would seem larger. Instead, he felt more crowded. The windows shrank. The ceilings lowered. There was something insistent about the furniture, as if it were pressing in on him.

Of course Sarah's personal belongings were gone, the little things like clothes and jewelry. But it emerged that some of the big things were more personal than he'd imagined. There was the drop-leaf desk in the living room, its pigeonholes stuffed with her clutter of torn envelopes and unanswered letters. There was the radio in the kitchen, set to play 98 Rock. (She liked to keep in touch with her students, she used to say in the old days, as she hummed and jittered her way around the breakfast table.) There was the chaise out back where she had sunbathed, planted in the only spot that got any sun at all. He looked at the flowered cushions and marveled at

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how an empty space could be so full of a person—her faint scent of coconut oil that always made him wish for a piña colada; her wide, gleaming face inscrutable behind dark glasses; her compact body in the skirted swimsuit she had tearfully insisted on buying after her fortieth birthday. Threads of her exuberant hair showed up at the bottom of the sink. Her shelf in the medicine cabinet, stripped, was splashed with drops of liquid rouge in a particular plummy shade that brought her instantly to Macon's mind. He had always disapproved of her messiness but now those spills seemed touching, like colorful toys left on the floor after a child has gone to bed.

The house itself was medium-sized, unexceptional to look at, standing on a street of such houses in an older part of Baltimore. Heavy oak trees hung over it, shading it from the hot summer sun but also blocking breezes. The rooms inside were square and dim. All that remained in Sarah's closet was a brown silk sash hanging on a hook; in her bureau drawers, lint balls and empty perfume bottles. Their son's old room was neatly made up, as sleek as a room in a Holiday Inn. Some places, the walls gave off a kind of echo. Still, Macon noticed he had a tendency to hold his arms close to his body, to walk past furniture sideways, as if he imagined the house could barely accommodate him. He felt too tall. His long, clumsy feet seemed unusually distant. He ducked his head in doorways.

Now was his chance to reorganize, he told himself. He was struck by an incongruous little jolt of interest. The fact was that running a house required some sort of system, and Sarah had never understood that. She was the sort of woman who stored her flatware intermingled. She thought nothing of running a dishwasher with only a handful of forks stacked inside. Macon found that distressing.

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He was opposed to dishwashers in general; he believed they wasted energy. Energy saving was a hobby of his, you might say.

He started keeping the kitchen sink filled at all times, adding some chlorine bleach for disinfectant. As he finished using each dish, he dropped it in. On alternate days he pulled the plug and sprayed everything with very hot water. Then he stacked the rinsed dishes in the empty dishwasher—which had become, under his new system, a gigantic storage area.

When he hunkered over the sink to let the spray attachment run, he often had the feeling that Sarah was watching. He sensed that if he slid his eyes just slightly to the left, he would find her with her arms folded across her chest, her head tipped and her full, curved lips meditatively pursed. At first glance she was simply studying his procedure; at second glance (he knew) she was laughing at him. There was a secret little gleam in her eyes that he was all too familiar with. 'I see,' she would say, nodding at some lengthy explanation of his; then he'd look up and catch the gleam and the telltale tuck at one corner of her mouth.

In this vision of her—if you could call it a vision, considering that he never did glance over at her—she was wearing a bright blue dress from the early days of their marriage. He had no idea when she had given that dress up, but certainly it was years and years ago. He almost felt that Sarah was a ghost—that she was dead. In a way (he thought, turning off the faucet), she *was* dead, that young, vivid Sarah from their first enthusiastic apartment on Cold Spring Lane. When he tried to recall those days, any image of Sarah was altered by the fact that she had left him. When he pictured their introduction—back when they were barely out of childhood—it

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seemed nothing more than the beginning of their parting. When she had looked up at him that first night and rattled the ice cubes in her paper cup, they were already moving toward their last edgy, miserable year together, toward those months when anything either of them said was wrong, toward that sense of narrowly missed connections. They were like people who run to meet, holding out their arms, but their aim is wrong; they pass each other and keep running. It had all amounted to nothing, in the end. He gazed down at the sink, and the warmth from the dishes drifted gently up into his face.

Well, you have to carry on. You have to carry on. He decided to switch his shower from morning to night. This showed adaptability, he felt—some freshness of spirit. While he showered he let the water collect in the tub, and he stalked around in noisy circles, sloshing the day's dirty clothes underfoot. Later he wrung out the clothes and hung them on hangers to dry. Then he dressed in tomorrow's underwear so he wouldn't have to launder any pajamas. In fact, his only real laundry was a load of towels and sheets once a week—just two towels, but quite a lot of sheets. This was because he had developed a system that enabled him to sleep in clean sheets every night without the trouble of bed changing. He'd been proposing the system to Sarah for years, but she was so set in her ways. What he did was strip the mattress of all linens, replacing them with a giant sort of envelope made from one of the seven sheets he had folded and stitched together on the sewing machine. He thought of this invention as a Macon Leary Body Bag. A body bag required no tucking in, was unmussable, easily changeable, and the perfect weight for summer nights. In winter he would have to

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devise something warmer, but he couldn't think of winter yet. He was barely making it from one day to the next as it was.

At moments—while he was skidding on the mangled clothes in the bathtub or struggling into his body bag on the naked, rust-stained mattress—he realized that he might be carrying things too far. He couldn't explain why, either. He'd always had a fondness for method, but not what you would call a mania. Thinking then of Sarah's lack of method, he wondered if that had got out of hand now too. Maybe all these years, they'd been keeping each other on a reasonable track. Separated, demagnetized somehow, they wandered wildly off course. He pictured Sarah's new apartment, which he had never seen, as chaotic to the point of madness, with sneakers in the oven and the sofa heaped with china. The mere thought of it upset him. He looked gratefully at his own surroundings.

Most of his work was done at home; otherwise he might not have cared so about the mechanics of the household. He had a little study in the spare room off the kitchen. Seated in a stenographer's chair, tapping away at a typewriter that had served him through four years of college, he wrote a series of guidebooks for people forced to travel on business. Ridiculous, when you thought about it: Macon hated travel. He careened through foreign territories on a desperate kind of blitz—squinching his eyes shut and holding his breath and hanging on for dear life, he sometimes imagined—and then settled back home with a sigh of relief to produce his chunky, passport-sized paperbacks. *Accidental Tourist in France*. *Accidental Tourist in Germany*. *In Belgium*. No author's name, just a logo: a winged armchair on the cover.

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He covered only the cities in these guides, for people taking business trips flew into cities and out again and didn't see the countryside at all. They didn't see the cities, for that matter. Their concern was how to pretend they had never left home. What hotels in Madrid boasted king-sized Beauty-rest mattresses? What restaurants in Tokyo offered Sweet'n'-Low? Did Amsterdam have a McDonald's? Did Mexico City have a Taco Bell? Did any place in Rome serve Chef Boyardee ravioli? Other travelers hoped to discover distinctive local wines; Macon's readers searched for pasteurized and homogenized milk.

As much as he hated the travel, he loved the writing—the virtuous delights of organizing a disorganized country, stripping away the inessential and the second-rate, classifying all that remained in neat, terse paragraphs. He cribbed from other guidebooks, seizing small kernels of value and discarding the rest. He spent pleasurable hours dithering over questions of punctuation. Righteously, mercilessly, he weeded out the passive voice. The effort of typing made the corners of his mouth turn down, so that no one could have guessed how much he was enjoying himself. *I am happy to say*, he pecked out, but his face remained glum and intense. *I am happy to say that it's possible now to buy Kentucky Fried Chicken in Stockholm. Pita bread, too*, he added as an afterthought. He wasn't sure how it had happened, but lately pita had grown to seem as American as hot dogs.

'Of course you're managing,' his sister told him over the phone. 'Did I say you weren't? But at least you could have let us know. Three weeks, it's been! Sarah's been gone three weeks and I only

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hear about it today. And by chance, at that. If I hadn't asked to speak to her, would you ever have told us she'd left you?'

'She didn't *leave* me,' Macon said. 'I mean it's not the way you make it sound. We discussed it like adults and decided to separate, that's all. The last thing I need is my family gathered around me saying, "Oh, poor Macon, how could Sarah do this to you—" '

'Why would I say that?' Rose asked. 'Everybody knows the Leary men are difficult to live with.'

'Oh,' Macon said.

'Where is she?'

'She's got a place downtown,' he said. 'And look,' he added, 'you don't have to bend over backwards, either, and go asking her to dinner or something. She does have a family of her own. You're supposed to take my side in this.'

'I thought you didn't want us to take sides.'

'No, no, I don't. I mean you shouldn't take *her* side, is what I'm trying to say.'

'When Charles's wife got her divorce,' Rose said, 'we went on having her to dinner every Christmas, just like always. Remember?'

'I remember,' Macon said wearily. Charles was their oldest brother.

'I suppose she'd still be coming, if she hadn't got remarried to someone so far away.'

'What? If her husband had been a Baltimore man you'd have gone on inviting them both?'

'She and Porter's wife and Sarah used to sit around the kitchen—this was before Porter's wife got *her* divorce—and they'd go on and on about the Leary men. Oh, it was the Leary men this, the Leary

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men that: how they always had to have everything just so, always so well thought out beforehand, always clamping down on the world as if they really thought they could keep it in line. The Leary men! I can hear them still. I had to laugh: One Thanksgiving Porter and June were getting ready to leave, back when their children were small, and June was heading toward the door with the baby in her arms and Danny hanging onto her coat and this load of toys and supplies when Porter called out, "Halt!" and started reading from one of those cash-register tapes that he always writes his lists on: *blanket, bottles, diaper bag, formula out of the fridge* . . . June just looked over at the other two and rolled her eyes.'

'Well, it wasn't such a bad idea,' Macon said, 'when you consider June.'

'No, and you notice it was alphabetical, too,' Rose said. 'I do think alphabetizing helps to sort things out a little.'

Rose had a kitchen that was so completely alphabetized, you'd find the allspice next to the ant poison. She was a fine one to talk about the Leary men.

'At any rate,' she said. 'Has Sarah been in touch since she left?'

'She's come by once or twice. Once, actually,' Macon said. 'For things she needed.'

'What kind of things?'

'Well, a double boiler. Things like that.'

'It's an excuse, then,' Rose said promptly. 'She could get a double boiler at any dimestore.'

'She said she liked ours.'

'She was checking to see how you're doing. She still cares. Did you talk at all?'

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'No,' Macon said, 'I just handed her the double boiler. Also that gadget that unscrews bottle tops.'

'Oh, Macon. You might have asked her in.'

'I was scared she'd say no,' he said.

There was a silence. 'Well. Anyhow,' Rose said finally.

'But I'm getting along!'

'Yes, of course you are,' she told him.

Then she said she had something in the oven and hung up.

Macon went over to his study window. It was a hot day in early July, the sky so blue it made his eyes ache. He rested his forehead against the glass and stared out at the yard, keeping his hands stuffed deep in the rear pockets of his khakis. Up in one of the oak trees, a bird sang what sounded like the first three notes of 'My Little Gypsy Sweetheart.' 'Slum . . . ber . . . on . . . ' it sang. Macon wondered if even this moment would become, one day, something he looked back upon wistfully. He couldn't imagine it; he couldn't think of any period bleaker than this in all his life, but he'd noticed how time had a way of coloring things. That bird, for instance, had such a pure, sweet, piercing voice.

He turned away from the window, covered his typewriter, and left the room.

He didn't eat real meals anymore. When he was hungry he drank a glass of milk, or he spooned a bit of ice cream directly from the carton. After the smallest snack he felt overfed and heavy, but he noticed when he dressed in the mornings that he seemed to be losing weight. His shirt collar stood out around his neck. The vertical groove between his nose and mouth had deepened so that he had

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trouble shaving it. His hair, which Sarah used to cut for him, jutted over his forehead like a shelf. And something had caused his lower lids to droop. He used to have narrow gray slits of eyes; now they were wide and startled. Could this be a sign of malnutrition?

Breakfast: Breakfast was your most important meal. He hooked up the percolator and the electric skillet to the clock radio on his bedroom windowsill. Of course he was asking for food poisoning, letting two raw eggs wait all night at room temperature, but once he'd changed menus there was no problem. You had to be flexible about these matters. He was awakened now by the smell of fresh coffee and hot buttered popcorn, and he could partake of both without getting out of bed. Oh, he was managing fine, just fine. All things considered.

But his nights were terrible.

It wasn't that he had trouble getting to sleep in the first place. That was easy. He'd watch TV till his eyes burned; then he'd climb the stairs. He would start the shower running and spread his clothes in the tub. At times he thought of skipping this part, except there was such a danger in falling behind with your system. So he carried out each step: hanging the laundry, setting up the breakfast things, flossing his teeth. He couldn't go to bed without flossing his teeth. For some reason, Sarah had found this irritating. If Macon were condemned to death, she'd said once, and they told him he'd be executed by firing squad at dawn, he would no doubt still insist on flossing the night before. Macon, after thinking it over, had agreed. Yes, of course he would. Hadn't he flossed while in the depths of pneumonia? In the hospital with gallstones? In a motel the night his son was killed? He checked his teeth in the mirror. They were

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never entirely white, in spite of all his care. And now it seemed his skin was taking on a yellowish cast as well.

He turned off the lights, moved the cat over, helped the dog up onto the bed. The dog was a Welsh corgi, very short-legged, but he did love to sleep in a bed, and so every night he stood erect and propped his elbows on the mattress and gazed at Macon expectantly till Macon gave him a boost. Then they'd all three settle themselves. Macon slipped into his envelope, the cat fitted her shape to the warm spot under his arm, and the dog plopped down near his feet. Then Macon closed his eyes and drifted off.

But eventually he found himself conscious of his dreams—not borne along by them but tediously constructing them, quibbling over details. When it dawned on him that he was awake, he would open his eyes and squint at the clock radio. But it was only one a.m. At the latest, two. There were all those hours still to be survived.

His brain buzzed with little worries. Had he left the back door unlocked? Forgotten to put the milk away? Made out a check for his bank balance instead of his gas bill? He remembered all in a rush that he'd opened a can of V-8 juice and then put the can in the icebox. Oxidation of the metal seams! Resulting in lead poisoning!

The worries changed, grew deeper. He wondered what had gone wrong with his marriage. Sarah had been his first and only girlfriend; now he thought he should have practiced on someone else beforehand. During the twenty years of their marriage there'd been moments—there'd been months—when he didn't feel they had really formed a unit the way couples were supposed to. No, they'd stayed two distinct people, and not always even friends. Sometimes they'd seemed more like rivals, elbowing each other,

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competing over who was the better style of person. Was it Sarah, haphazard, mercurial? Was it Macon, methodical and steady?

When Ethan was born, he only brought out more of their differences. Things they had learned to ignore in each other resurfaced. Sarah never got their son on any kind of schedule at all, was lax and unconcerned. And Macon (oh, he knew it, he admitted it) had been so intent on preparing him for every eventuality that he hadn't had time to enjoy him. Ethan at two, at four floated up into his vision as clearly as a color film projected upon the bedroom ceiling. A chortling, sunny little boy, he'd been, with Macon a stooped shape above him wringing his hands. Macon had been fierce in teaching him, at age six, how to swing a bat; it would have wrenched his soul to have Ethan chosen last for any team. 'Why?' Sarah had asked. 'If he's chosen last, he's chosen last. Let it be, why don't you.' Let it be! Life was so full of things you couldn't do anything about; you had to avert what you could. She laughed when Macon spent one fall collecting Wacky Packs, which had these jokey stickers inside that Ethan liked to plaster his bedroom door with. He'd have more than anyone in the whole third grade, Macon vowed. Long after Ethan had lost interest, Macon was still doggedly bringing them home. He knew it was absurd, but still, there was this one last sticker they had not yet managed to get hold of . . .

Ethan went away to camp when he was twelve—a year ago, almost exactly. Most boys started earlier, but Macon had kept delaying it. Why have a child at all, he asked Sarah, if you were only going to ship him off to some godforsaken spot in Virginia? By the time he finally gave in, Ethan was in the top age group—a tall

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blond sprout of a boy with an open, friendly face and an endearing habit of bouncing on the balls of his feet when he was nervous.

Don't think about it.

He was murdered in a Burger Bonanza his second night at camp. It was one of those deaths that make no sense—the kind where the holdup man has collected his money and is free to go but decides, instead, first to shoot each and every person through the back of the skull.

Ethan wasn't even supposed to be there. He had snuck away from camp with a cabinmate, who waited outside as a lookout.

Blame the camp for not supervising. Blame Burger Bonanza for poor security. Blame the cabinmate for not going in too and altering, perhaps, what took place. (Lookout for what, for God's sake?) Blame Sarah for allowing Ethan to leave home; blame Macon for agreeing; blame even (hell, yes) Ethan. Blame Ethan for wanting to attend that camp and for sneaking off from it, and for entering Burger Bonanza like some headstrong fool while a holdup was in progress. Blame him for so meekly moving to the kitchen with the others, for placing his hands flat against the wall as he was ordered and no doubt bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet . . .

Don't think about it.

The director of the camp, not wanting to break the news on the phone, had driven to Baltimore to tell them in person. Then he'd driven them back to Virginia. Macon often recalled that director. Jim, his name was, Jim Robinson or maybe Robertson—a burly, white-whiskered man with a crew cut, wearing a suit coat, as if in respect, over a Redskins T-shirt. He'd seemed uncomfortable with silence and did his best to fill it with abrupt little fragments

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of chitchat. Macon hadn't listened, or he'd thought he hadn't; but now all the fragments came back to him. How Jim's mother had been a Baltimorean herself, born the year Babe Ruth was playing for the Orioles. How Jim's tomato plants had been acting queerly, producing only tiny green marbles that fell off the vines before they ripened. How Jim's wife was terrified of driving in reverse and avoided any situation that required it. Macon gave a lot of thought to that now, lying in his bed at night. Could you really drive a car without reversing? What about at intersections, where a bus driver pokes his head out his window and asks you to roll on back a few yards so he can turn? Would she refuse? Macon imagined her, staunch and defiant, glaring straight in front of her and pretending not to notice. The driver escalating into curses, horns blowing, other drivers shouting, 'Aw, lady!' It made a nice picture. He kept it firmly in mind.

Finally he would sit up and wriggle out of his sheet. The dog, sighing, roused himself and dropped off the bed to pad downstairs behind him. The floorboards were cool underfoot, the kitchen linoleum cooler still; there was a glow from the refrigerator as Macon poured himself a glass of milk. He went to the living room and turned on the TV. Generally some black-and-white movie was running—men in suits and felt hats, women with padded shoulders. He didn't try to follow the plot. He took small, steady sips of milk, feeling the calcium traveling to his bones. Hadn't he read that calcium cures insomnia? He absently stroked the cat, who had somehow crept into his lap. It was much too hot to have a cat in his lap, especially this one—a loose-strung, gray tweed female who seemed made of some unusually dense substance. And the dog,

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most often, would be lying on top of his feet. 'It's just you and me, old buddies,' Macon would tell them. The cat made a comma of sweat across his bare thighs.

At last he would slip out from under the animals and turn off the TV. He would put his glass in the chlorine solution in the kitchen sink. He would climb the stairs. He'd stand at the bedroom window looking over the neighborhood—black branches scrawled on a purple night sky, a glimmer of white clapboard here and there, occasionally a light. Macon always took comfort if he found a light. Someone else had trouble sleeping too, he assumed. He didn't like to consider any other possibility—a party, for instance, or a heart-to-heart talk with old friends. He preferred to believe that someone else was on his own, sitting up wide awake fending off his thoughts. That made him feel much better. He returned to his bed. He lay down. He closed his eyes and without even trying, he dropped off the edge into sleep.

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3

Sarah telephoned Macon and asked if she could come get the navy blue rug from the dining room.

'Navy blue rug,' Macon repeated. (He was stalling for time.)

'I wouldn't mention it except you never liked it,' Sarah told him. 'You said it was a mistake to have a rug where people were eating.'

Yes, he had said that. A crumb catcher, he'd said. Unsanitary. Then why did he feel this sudden, wrenching need to keep the rug for himself?

'Macon, are you there?'

'Yes, I'm here.'

'So would you mind if I came and got it?'

'No, I guess not.'

'Oh, good. My apartment has these bare floors and you've no idea how—'

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She would stop by for the rug and he'd invite her in. He'd offer her a glass of sherry. They would sit on the couch with their sherry and he would say, 'Sarah, have you missed me?' Or no, he'd say, 'I've missed you, Sarah.'

She would say . . .

She said, 'I thought I'd drop over Saturday morning, if that's convenient.'

But people don't drink sherry in the morning.

And besides: He wouldn't even be here then. 'I leave for England tomorrow afternoon,' he said.

'Oh, is it time for England again?'

'Maybe you could come this evening.'

'No, my car's in the shop.'

'Your car? What's wrong with it?'

'Well, I was driving along and . . . you know that little red light on the lefthand side of the dash?'

'What, the oil pressure light?'

'Yes, and so I thought, "Well, I'll be late for the dentist if I stop and see to it now and anyway, the car does seem to be running all right, so—" '

'Wait. Are you saying the light lit up? And then you went on driving?'

'Well, nothing sounded any different and nothing *acted* any different, so I figured—'

'Jesus, Sarah.'

'What's so terrible about that?'

'You've probably ruined the engine.'

'No, I did not ruin the engine, for your information. I just need

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this single, simple repair job but unfortunately it's going to take a few days to do it. Well, never mind. I've got a house key; I'll just let myself in on Saturday.'

'Maybe I could bring the rug over.'

'I'll wait till Saturday.'

'That way I could see your apartment,' Macon said. 'I've never been inside, you know.'

'No, it's not fixed up yet.'

'I don't care if it's fixed up.'

'It's a disaster. Nothing's been done.'

'How could nothing be done? You've been living there over a month.'

'Well, I'm not so wonderfully perfectly efficient as you are, Macon.'

'You wouldn't have to be efficient to—'

'Some days,' Sarah said, 'I can't even make it out of my bathrobe.'

Macon was silent.

'I should have agreed to teach summer school,' Sarah said. 'Something to give some shape to things. I open my eyes in the morning and think, "Why bother getting up?" '

'Me too,' Macon said.

'Why bother eating? Why bother breathing?'

'Me too, sweetheart.'

'Macon, do you suppose that person has any idea? I want to go see him in prison, Macon. I want to sit on the other side of the grid or the screen or whatever they have and I'll say, "Look at me. Look. Look at what you did. You didn't just kill the people you shot; you killed other people besides. What you did goes on and on forever.

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You didn't just kill my son; you killed me; you killed my husband. I mean I can't even manage to put up my curtains; do you understand what you did?" Then when I'm sure that he does understand, that he really does realize, that he feels just terrible, I'm going to open my purse and pull out a gun and shoot him between the eyes.'

'Oh, well, sweetheart—'

'You think I'm just raving, don't you. But Macon, I swear, I can feel that little kick against my palm when I fire the gun. I've never fired a gun in my life—Lord, I don't think I've ever *seen* a gun. Isn't it odd? Ethan's seen one; Ethan's had an experience you and I have no notion of. But sometimes I hold my hand out with the thumb cocked like when kids play cowboy, and I fold my trigger finger and feel what a satisfaction it would be.'

'Sarah, it's bad for you to talk like this.'

'Oh? How am I supposed to talk?'

'I mean if you let yourself get angry you'll be . . . consumed. You'll burn up. It's not productive.'

'Oh, productive! Well, goodness, no, let's not waste our time on anything unproductive.'

Macon massaged his forehead. He said, 'Sarah, I just feel we can't afford to have these thoughts.'

'Easy for you to say.'

'No, it is not easy for me to say, dammit—'

'Just shut the door, Macon. Just walk away. Just pretend it never happened. Go rearrange your tools, why don't you; line up your wrenches from biggest to smallest instead of from smallest to biggest; that's always fun.'

'Goddammit, Sarah—'

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'Don't you curse at me, Macon Leary!'

They paused.

Macon said, 'Well.'

Sarah said, 'Well, anyhow.'

'So I guess you'll come by while I'm gone,' he said.

'If that's all right.'

'Yes, certainly,' he said.

Although he felt a curious uneasiness when he hung up, as if he were letting a stranger come. As if she might walk off with more than just the dining room rug.

For his trip to England, he dressed in his most comfortable suit. *One suit is plenty*, he counseled in his guidebooks, *if you take along some travel-size packets of spot remover*. (Macon knew every item that came in travel-size packets, from deodorant to shoe polish.) *The suit should be a medium gray. Gray not only hides the dirt; it's handy for sudden funerals and other formal events. At the same time, it isn't too somber for everyday*.

He packed a minimum of clothes and a shaving kit. A copy of his most recent guide to England. A novel to read on the plane.

Bring only what fits in a carry-on bag. Checking your luggage is asking for trouble. Add several travel-size packets of detergent so you won't fall into the hands of foreign laundries.

When he'd finished packing, he sat on the couch to rest. Or not to rest, exactly, but to collect himself—like a man taking several deep breaths before diving into a river.

The furniture was all straight lines and soothing curves. Dust motes hung in a slant of sunlight. What a peaceful life he led here!

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If this were any other day he'd be making some instant coffee. He would drop the spoon in the sink and stand sipping from his mug while the cat wove between his feet. Then maybe he'd open the mail. Those acts seemed dear and gentle now. How could he have complained of boredom? At home he had everything set up around him so he hardly needed to think. On trips, even the smallest task required effort and decisions.

When it was two hours till takeoff, he stood up. The airport was a thirty-minute drive at the most, but he hated feeling rushed. He made a final tour of the house, stopping off at the downstairs bathroom—the last *real* bathroom (was how he thought of it) that he'd see for the next week. He whistled for the dog. He picked up his bag and stepped out the front door. The heat slammed into him like something solid.

The dog was going with him only as far as the vet's. If he'd known that, he never would have jumped into the car. He sat next to Macon, panting enthusiastically, his keg-shaped body alert with expectation. Macon talked to him in what he hoped was an unalarming tone. 'Hot, isn't it, Edward. You want the air conditioner on?' He adjusted the controls. 'There now. Feeling better?' He heard something unctuous in his voice. Maybe Edward did, too, for he stopped panting and gave Macon a sudden suspicious look. Macon decided to say no more.

They rolled through the neighborhood, down streets roofed over with trees. They turned into a sunnier section full of stores and service stations. As they neared Murray Avenue, Edward started whimpering. In the parking lot of the Murray Avenue Veterinary Hospital, he somehow became a much smaller animal.

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Macon got out of the car and walked around to open the door. When he took hold of Edward's collar, Edward dug his toenails into the upholstery. He had to be dragged all the way to the building, scritching across the hot concrete.

The waiting room was empty. A goldfish tank bubbled in one corner, with a full-color poster above it illustrating the life cycle of the heartworm. There was a girl on a stool behind the counter, a waifish little person in a halter top.

'I've brought my dog for boarding,' Macon said. He had to raise his voice to be heard above Edward's moans.

Chewing her gum steadily, the girl handed him a printed form and a pencil. 'Ever been here before?' she asked.

'Yes, often.'

'What's the last name?'

'Leary.'

'Leary. Leary,' she said, riffling through a box of index cards. Macon started filling out the form. Edward was standing upright now and clinging to Macon's knees, like a toddler scared of nursery school.

'Whoa,' the girl said.

She frowned at the card she'd pulled.

'Edward?' she said. 'On Rayford Road?'

'That's right.'

'We can't accept him.'

'What?'

'Says here he bit an attendant. Says, "Bit Barry in the ankle, do not readmit." '

'Nobody told me that.'

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'Well, they should have.'

'Nobody said a word! I left him in June when we went to the beach; I came back and they handed him over.'

The girl blinked at him, expressionless.

'Look,' Macon said. 'I'm on my way to the airport, right this minute. I've got a plane to catch.'

'I'm only following orders,' the girl said.

'And what set him off, anyhow?' Macon asked. 'Did anyone think to wonder? Maybe Edward had good reason!'

The girl blinked again. Edward had dropped to all fours by now and was gazing upward with interest, as if following the conversation.

'Ah, the hell with it,' Macon said. 'Come on, Edward.'

He didn't have to take hold of Edward's collar when they left. Edward galloped ahead of him all the way across the parking lot.

In that short time, the car had turned into an oven. Macon opened his window and sat there with the motor idling. What now? He considered going to his sister's, but she probably wouldn't want Edward either. To tell the truth, this wasn't the first time there had been complaints. Last week, for instance, Macon's brother Charles had stopped by to borrow a router, and Edward had darted in a complete circle around his feet, taking furious little nibbles of his trouser cuffs. Charles was so astonished that he just turned his head slowly, gaping down. 'What's got into him?' he asked. 'He never *used* to do this.' Then when Macon grabbed his collar, Edward had snarled. He'd curled his upper lip and snarled. Could a dog have a nervous breakdown?

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Macon wasn't very familiar with dogs. He preferred cats. He liked the way cats kept their own counsel. It was only lately that he'd given Edward any thought at all. Now that he was alone so much he had taken to talking out loud to him, or sometimes he just sat studying him. He admired Edward's intelligent brown eyes and his foxy little face. He appreciated the honey-colored whorls that radiated so symmetrically from the bridge of his nose. And his walk! Ethan used to say that Edward walked as if he had sand in his bathing suit. His rear end waddled busily; his stubby legs seemed hinged by some more primitive mechanism than the legs of taller dogs.

Macon was driving toward home now, for lack of any better idea. He wondered what would happen if he left Edward in the house the way he left the cat, with plenty of food and water. No. Or could Sarah come see to him, two or three times a day? He recoiled from that; it meant asking her. It meant dialing that number he'd never used and asking her for a favor.

MEOW-BOW ANIMAL HOSPITAL, a sign across the street read. Macon braked and Edward lurched forward. 'Sorry,' Macon told him. He made a left turn into the parking lot.

The waiting room at the Meow-Bow smelled strongly of disinfectant. Behind the counter stood a thin young woman in a ruffled peasant blouse. She had aggressively frizzy black hair that burgeoned to her shoulders like an Arab headdress. 'Hi, there,' she said to Macon.

Macon said, 'Do you board dogs?'

'Sure.'

'I'd like to board Edward, here.'

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She leaned over the counter to look at Edward. Edward panted up at her cheerfully. It was clear he hadn't yet realized what kind of place this was.

'You have a reservation?' the woman asked Macon.

'Reservation! No.'

'Most people reserve.'

'Well, I didn't know that.'

'Especially in the summer.'

'Couldn't you make an exception?'

She thought it over, frowning down at Edward. Her eyes were very small, like caraway seeds, and her face was sharp and colorless.

'Please,' Macon said. 'I'm about to catch a plane. I'm leaving for a week, and I don't have a soul to look after him. I'm desperate, I tell you.'

From the glance she shot at him, he sensed he had surprised her in some way. 'Can't you leave him home with your wife?' she asked.

He wondered how on earth her mind worked.

'If I could do that,' he said, 'why would I be standing here?'

'Oh,' she said. 'You're not married?'

'Well, I am, but she's . . . living elsewhere. They don't allow pets.'

'Oh.'

She came out from behind the counter. She was wearing very short red shorts; her legs were like sticks. 'I'm a divorsy myself,' she said. 'I know what you're going through.'

'And see,' Macon said, 'there's this place I usually board him but they suddenly claim he bites. Claim he bit an attendant and they can't admit him anymore.'

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'Edward? Do you bite?' the woman said.

Macon realized he should not have mentioned that, but she seemed to take it in stride. 'How could you do such a thing?' she asked Edward. Edward grinned up at her and folded his ears back, inviting a pat. She bent and stroked his head.

'So will you keep him?' Macon said.

'Oh, I guess,' she said, straightening. 'If you're desperate.' She stressed the word—fixing Macon with those small brown eyes—as if giving it more weight than he had intended. 'Fill this out,' she told him, and she handed him a form from a stack on the counter. 'Your name and address and when you'll be back. Don't forget to put when you'll be back.'

Macon nodded, uncapping his fountain pen.

'I'll most likely see you again when you come to pick him up,' she said. 'I mean if you put the time of day to expect you. My name's Muriel.'

'Is this place open evenings?' Macon asked.

'Every evening but Sundays. Till eight.'

'Oh, good.'

'Muriel Pritchett,' she said.

Macon filled out the form while the woman knelt to unbuckle Edward's collar. Edward licked her cheekbone; he must have thought she was just being friendly. So when Macon had finished, he didn't say good-bye. He left the form on the counter and walked out very quickly, keeping a hand in his pocket to silence his keys.

On the flight to New York, he sat next to a foreign-looking man with a mustache. Clamped to the man's ears was a headset for one of

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those miniature tape recorders. Perfect: no danger of conversation. Macon leaned back in his seat contentedly.

He approved of planes. When the weather was calm, you couldn't even tell you were moving. You could pretend you were sitting safe at home. The view from the window was always the same—air and more air—and the interior of one plane was practically interchangeable with the interior of any other.

He accepted nothing from the beverage cart, but the man beside him took off his headset to order a Bloody Mary. A tinny, intricate, Middle Eastern melody came whispering out of the pink sponge earplugs. Macon stared down at the little machine and wondered if he should buy one. Not for the music, heaven knows—there was far too much noise in the world already—but for insulation. He could plug himself into it and no one would disturb him. He could play a blank tape: thirty full minutes of silence. Turn the tape over and play thirty minutes more.

They landed at Kennedy and he took a shuttle bus to his connecting flight, which wasn't due to leave till evening. Once settled in the terminal, he began filling out a crossword puzzle that he'd saved for this occasion from last Sunday's *New York Times*. He sat inside a kind of barricade—his bag on one chair, his suit coat on another. People milled around him but he kept his eyes on the page, progressing smoothly to the acrostic as soon as he'd finished the crossword. By the time he'd solved both puzzles, they were beginning to board the plane.

His seatmate was a gray-haired woman with glasses. She had brought her own knitted afghan. This was not a good sign, Macon felt, but he could handle it. First he bustled about, loosening his tie

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and taking off his shoes and removing a book from his bag. Then he opened the book and ostentatiously started reading.

The name of his book was *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*, and it was 1,198 pages long. (*Always bring a book, as protection against strangers. Magazines don't last. Newspapers from home will make you homesick, and newspapers from elsewhere will remind you you don't belong. You know how alien another paper's typeface seems.*) He'd been lugging around *Miss MacIntosh* for years. It had the advantage of being plotless, as far as he could tell, but invariably interesting, so he could dip into it at random. Any time he raised his eyes, he was careful to mark a paragraph with his finger and to keep a bemused expression on his face.

There was the usual mellifluous murmur from the loudspeaker about seatbelts, emergency exits, oxygen masks. He wondered why stewardesses accented such unlikely words. '*On* our flight this evening we *will* be offering . . .' The woman next to him asked if he wanted a Lifesaver. 'No, thank you,' Macon said, and he went on with his book. She rustled some little bit of paper, and shortly afterward the smell of spearmint drifted over to him.

He refused a cocktail and he refused a supper tray, although he did accept the milk that was offered with it. He ate an apple and a little box of raisins from his bag, drank the milk, and went off to the lavatory to floss and brush his teeth. When he returned the plane was darker, dotted here and there with reading lamps. Some of the passengers were already asleep. His seatmate had rolled her hair into little O's and X-ed them over with bobby pins. Macon found it amazing that people could be so unself-conscious on airplanes. He'd seen men in whole suits of pajamas; he'd seen

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women slathered in face cream. You would think they felt no need to be on guard.

He angled his book beneath a slender shaft of light and turned a page. The engines had a weary, dogged sound. It was the period he thought of as the long haul—the gulf between supper and breakfast when they were suspended over the ocean, waiting for that lightening of the sky that was supposed to be morning although, of course, it was nowhere near morning back home. In Macon's opinion, morning in other time zones was like something staged—a curtain painted with a rising sun, superimposed upon the real dark.

He let his head tip back against the seat and closed his eyes. A stewardess's voice, somewhere near the front of the plane, threaded in and out of the droning of the engines. 'We just sat and sat and there wasn't a thing to do and all we had was the Wednesday paper and you know how news just never seems to happen on a Wednesday . . .'

Macon heard a man speaking levelly in his ear. 'Macon.' But he didn't even turn his head. By now he knew these tricks of sound on planes at night. He saw behind his eyelids the soap dish on the kitchen sink at home—another trick, this concreteness of vision. It was an oval china soap dish painted with yellow roses, containing a worn-down sliver of soap and Sarah's rings, her engagement ring and her wedding band, just as she had left them when she walked out.

'I got the tickets,' he heard Ethan say. 'And they're opening the doors in five minutes.'

'All right,' Macon told him, 'let's plan our strategy.'

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'Strategy?'

'Where we're going to sit.'

'Why would we need strategy for that?'

'It's you who asked to see this movie, Ethan. I would think you'd take an interest in where you're sitting. Now, here's my plan. You go around to that line on the left. Count the little kids. I'll count the line on the right.'

'Aw, Dad—'

'Do you want to sit next to some noisy little kid?'

'Well, no.'

'And which do you prefer: an aisle seat?'

'I don't care.'

'Aisle, Ethan? Or middle of the row? You must have some opinion.'

'Not really.'

'Middle of the row?'

'It doesn't make any difference.'

'Ethan. It makes a great deal of difference. Aisle, you can get out quicker. So if you plan to buy a snack or go to the restroom, you'll want to sit on the aisle. On the other hand, everyone'll be squeezing past you there. So if you don't think you'll be leaving your seat, then I suggest—'

'Aw, Dad, for Christ's sake!' Ethan said.

'Well,' Macon said. 'If that's the tone you're going to take, we'll just sit any damn place we happen to end up.'

'Fine,' Ethan said.

'Fine,' Macon said.

Now he did turn his head; he rocked it from side to side. But

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