



THREE
DAYS

in

JUNE

A NOVEL

ANNE
TYLER

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF
A SPOOL OF BLUE THREAD

ALSO BY ANNE TYLER

If Morning Ever Comes

The Tin Can Tree

A Slipping-Down Life

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The Amateur Marriage

Digging to America

Noah's Compass

The Beginner's Goodbye

A Spool of Blue Thread

Vinegar Girl

Clock Dance

Redhead by the Side of the Road

French Braid

THREE DAYS
IN JUNE



Anne Tyler



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DAY OF BEAUTY

People don't tap their watches anymore; have you noticed?

Standard wristwatches, I'm talking about. Remember how people used to tap them?

My father, for instance. His watch was a Timex with a face as big as a fifty-cent piece, and whenever my mother kept him waiting he would frown down at it and give it a tap. Implying, I suppose now, "Can this possibly be correct? Could it really be this late?" But when I was a little girl, I imagined he was trying to make time move faster—to bring my mother before us instantly, already wearing her coat, like someone in a speeded-up movie.

What reminded me of this recently was that Marilee Burton, the headmistress at the school where I worked, called me into her office one Friday morning as I was walking past. "Come chat for a moment, why don't you?" she said. This was not a regular occurrence. (We were on more or less formal terms.) She waved toward the Windsor chair facing her desk, but I stayed in the doorway and cocked my head at her.

"I thought I should let you know," she said, "I won't be coming in on Monday. I have to have a cardioversion."

"A what?" I asked.

"A procedure for my heart. It's been beating wrong."

"Oh," I said. I couldn't pretend to be surprised. She was one of those ladylike women who wear heels on all occasions, the perfect candidate for heart issues. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that," I told her.

"They're giving it an electrical jolt that will stop it and then start it again."

"Huh," I said. "Like tapping a watch."

"Pardon?"

"Is it dangerous?" I asked.

“No, no,” she said. “I’ve had it done once before, in fact. But that was over spring break, so I didn’t see the need to announce it.”

“Okay,” I said. “And how long will you be out of the office?”

“I’ll be back on Tuesday, good as new. No need to alter your routine in the slightest. *However*,” she said, and then she sat straighter behind her desk; she cleared her throat; she briskly aligned a stack of papers that didn’t need aligning. “*However*, it brings me to a subject I’ve been meaning to discuss with you.”

I stood a bit straighter myself. I am very alert to people’s tones of voice.

“I’ll be sixty-six years old on my next birthday,” she said, “and Ralph just turned sixty-eight. He’s starting to talk about traveling a bit, and seeing more of the grandchildren.”

“Really.”

“So I’m thinking of handing in my resignation before the new school year begins.”

The new school year would begin in September. We were already in late June.

I said, “So...does this mean I’ll take over as headmistress?”

It was a perfectly logical question, right? *Somebody* had to do it. And I was next in line, for sure. I’d been Marilee’s assistant for the past eleven years. But Marilee let a small silence develop, as if I’d presumed in some way. Then she said, “Well, that’s what I wanted to chat about.”

She selected the top sheet on her stack of papers, and she turned it around to face me and slid it across her desk. I stepped forward, grudgingly. I squinted at it. A typewritten page with a newspaper clipping stapled to one corner—a black-and-white photo of a serious young woman with energetically curly dark hair. “Nashville Educator’s Study on Learning Differences Wins McLellan Prize,” the headline read.

I said, “Nashville?” (We lived in Baltimore.) And I had no idea what the McLellan Prize was.

“I brought her name to the board’s attention when I first began to think of retiring,” Marilee said. “Dorothy Edge; maybe you’ve heard of her. I’d read her book, you see, and I’d found it very impressive.”

“You brought her to the board’s attention,” I repeated.

“After all, Gail,” she said. “You’re sixty-one years old, am I right? You won’t be working much longer yourself.”

"I'm sixty-one years old!" I said. "Nowhere near retirement age!"

"It's not only a matter of age," she told me. She was looking at me with her chin raised, the way people do when they know they're in the wrong. "Face it: this job is a matter of people skills. *You* know that! And surely you'll be the first to admit that social interactions have never been your strong point."

"What are you talking about?" I asked her. "What possible interactions could you be referring to?"

"I mean, of course you have many other skills," Marilee said. "You're much more organized than I am. You're a much better public speaker. But look at just now, for instance. I tell you I have a heart condition and you just say, 'Oh,' and pass right on to the question of taking over my job."

"I said, 'Oh,'" I reminded her. "I said, 'I'm sorry to hear that.'" (Another of my strengths is that I have a very good audial memory, including for my own words.) "What more did you require of me?"

"I 'required' nothing at all," she said, and now her chin was practically pointed at the ceiling. "All I'm saying is, to head a private girls' school you need tact. You need diplomacy. You need to avoid saying things like 'Good God, Mrs. Morris, surely you realize your daughter doesn't have the slightest chance of getting into Princeton.'"

"Katy Morris couldn't get into a decent *trade* school," I said.

"That's not the point," Marilee said.

"So?" I said. "Just because I refuse to sweet-talk all your rich-guy parents I'm doomed to stay on forever as assistant headmistress?"

"Or," Marilee said, and now she lowered her chin and gazed at me directly across the expanse of her desk. "Perhaps *not* stay on."

"Excuse me?"

"Think of some new occupation, perhaps," she suggested. "Strike out in a whole new direction. Do something you've always dreamed of doing; what do you say?"

I wondered what on earth she imagined that might be. I am not the kind of woman who dreams of doing things.

"Dottie, I mean Dr. Edge, has expressed a wish that we bring in the assistant she's been working with in Nashville," Marilee said. "Apparently the two of them have formed quite an effective team together."

Dottie.

All this time, I'd been clasping my purse with both hands in front of me. (Marilee had caught me on my way to my office, at the very start of the day.) Now I felt like some sort of beggar, like someone lacing her fingers together and pleading for a favor, and I dropped my purse to my left side. "Well," I said, "I hope they'll both be very happy here. Good-bye, Marilee."

"Gail?"

I spun on my heel and walked out.

"Gail, *please* don't be like this!"

I walked back down the hall to the foyer, past the trophy case, and out the front door to the street.

Didn't even stop to collect the pen-and-pencil set on my desk, or the photo of my daughter in her cap and gown, or the cardigan I kept hanging in the closet. Someone could send it all to me later, I thought. Or throw it out; what did I care?

In the parking lot there were only three cars—Marilee's and mine and the custodian's. The sky overhead was gray and looming—rain had been forecast for later—and the two workmen setting traffic cones on the nearby sidewalk wore bright orange slickers. I got into my Corolla and started the engine and took off immediately, not even pausing to roll down my window, although the interior felt like an oven already. I couldn't bear to be observed, was why. I felt embarrassed; I felt conspicuous.

Although it wasn't as if this were *my* fault!

I lived in a neighborhood so close to the school that sometimes I walked to work, but I had driven that morning because I'd been planning to stop by the cleaner's afterward and pick up the dress I'd be wearing that evening. It was the evening of my daughter's wedding rehearsal, with dinner to follow. But now I couldn't imagine attending, even. I pictured sitting in the half-empty church while the rest of the wedding party pointed at me and whispered. "Poor, poor Gail," they would whisper. "Have you heard?"

She was let go, at age sixty-one.

Lacks people skills.

Wasn't even consulted about her daughter's Day of Beauty today at Darleen's Spa and Massage. The groom's mother set that up entirely on her own. (What could *Gail*

have contributed? she must have thought. Such a...right-angled person, such a pale-faced, straight-haired person who doesn't care in the least about looks!)

But they could at least have discussed it with me. I was the mother of the bride.

Never mind that I hadn't known there was even such a thing as a Day of Beauty.



I didn't stop by the cleaner's. I drove directly home. I parked at the curb and climbed the steps to the porch, unlocked the door, and walked into the living room and sank into the first chair I came to, facing the front window. A gauzy white curtain misted the view, so no one could look in and see me. Grandpa Simmons's mantel clock ticked on the bookcase. I didn't possess an actual mantel. This was a very small, very unassuming house, two-bedroom, built sometime in the sixties. TV set so old that it stuck out in back a good foot and a half. Crocheted afghan draped over one couch arm to hide where the upholstery had worn down to bare threads. I did own the house outright, though. I bought it with the money my father left me. I could have taken over my parents' house, since my mother moved to a high-rise immediately after his death, but by that time my marriage was already on rocky ground and I knew that what I needed was a place I could maintain on my own without needing to count on Max. I don't mean that Max was a deadbeat, or anything like that; it was just that he had a tendency to choose low-paying jobs. To this day, he lived hand to mouth—taught at a school for at-risk teenagers over on the Eastern Shore. Rented a one-room apartment above somebody's garage.

No one had ever told me before that I lacked people skills. Not in so many words, at least. It was true that my one-time mother-in-law had given me a copy of *Manners for the Mystified*, but that was just...pro forma, right? All brides could use an etiquette book! She didn't mean anything by it.

I wrote her a thank-you note for that book just to prove that my manners were fine, and then Max suggested that maybe we could invite his parents to dinner and I could go to extremes on the etiquette—offer finger bowls after the soup or something. He was joking, of course. I don't think we ever did have his parents to dinner.

Did Marilee imagine that I was independently wealthy? I couldn't *afford* to quit work!

The clock gathered itself together with a whirring of gears and struck a series of blurry notes. Nine o'clock, I was thinking; but no, it turned out to be ten. I'd been sitting there in a sort of stupor, evidently. I stood up and hung my purse in the closet, but then outside the window I saw some movement on the other side of the curtain, some dark and ponderous shape laboring up my front walk. I tweaked the curtain aside a half inch. Max, for God's sake. Max with a duffel bag slung over one shoulder, and a bulky square suitcase dangling from his left hand.

I went to the front door and opened it and looked out at him through the screen. "What on earth?" I asked him.

"You're home!" he said.

"Yes..."

"Debbie is at something called a Day of Beauty."

"Right," I said.

"But she knew ahead I was coming. I told her I was coming. I get there and no one's home. I call her cell phone and she says she didn't expect me so early."

"Why *did* you come so early?" I asked him.

"I wanted to beat the rush. You know what Fridays are like on the Bay Bridge."

All the more reason not to live on the other side of it, I could have pointed out. I opened the screen door for him and reached for his suitcase, but it wasn't a suitcase; it was some kind of animal carrier. Square patch of wire grid on the end and something watchful and alert staring out from behind it gleaming-eyed. Max moved the carrier away from me a bit and said, "I've got it."

"What is it?"

"It's a cat."

"A cat!"

"Could I come in, do you think?"

I retreated and he lumbered in, out of breath, shaking the floorboards. Max was nowhere near fat, but he was *weighty*, broad shouldered; he always gave the impression of taking up more than his share of room, although he was not much taller than I was. In the years since we'd divorced he had grown the kind of beard that you're not quite

sure is deliberate; maybe he'd merely forgotten to shave for a while. A short gray frizzle with a frizzle of gray hair to match, and he seemed to have given up on his clothes; generally he wore stretched-out knit tops and baggy khakis. I hoped he'd brought a suit for the wedding. You never could be sure.

"Couldn't you have just left your cat at home with food and water?" I asked, following him through the living room. "I mean, it's already bad enough that you're staying with Debbie yourself. In the middle of her wedding preparations, for God's sake!"

"She said it would be fine if I stayed," Max told me. "She said it wasn't a problem."

"Okay, but then to add a cat to the mix...Cats do very well on their own. They almost prefer it, in fact."

"Not this one," he said. He set the carrier on my kitchen counter. "This one is too new."

"It's a kitten?"

"No, no, it's old."

"You just said—"

"It's an elderly female cat who belonged to a very old woman, and now the woman has up and died and the cat is in mourning," he told me.

There was a lot I could have asked about this, but it didn't seem worth the effort. I leaned closer to peer at the cat. "Does Debbie know you're bringing it?" I asked him.

"Now she does."

I waited.

"It's complicated," he said. He blotted his face on his shoulder. "I phoned her; I said, 'Where *are* you?' She says she's at a Day of Beauty. 'Did you leave a key out someplace?' I asked her, and she says no, but she'll be home in a few hours. 'A few hours!' I say. 'I can't wait a few hours! I've got a cat here!' She says, 'A what?' Then she hits the roof. Tells me I can in no way bring a cat to her house, because Kenneth is allergic."

"He is?" I said.

"*Deathly* allergic, is how she put it."

"But...Kenneth doesn't live there," I said.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Max told me. “You know he stays over a lot, and besides, he does plan to live there after the wedding.”

“Well, sure, *after* the wedding.”

“‘Deathly’ allergic, Gail. As in, if he walks into a house where a cat has left a smidgen of dander behind, even if the cat is long gone he’ll need a respirator.”

“A respirator!”

“Or whatever you call those things that asthmatics have to carry around with them.”

“You mean an atomizer,” I said.

“No, not an atomizer; a what’s-it. A vaporizer, maybe?”

I thought it over.

“At any rate, that’s what Debbie claimed. She claimed that even if he’s just standing next to her and she has cat dander on her sweater, he will start choking up and he’ll need a...”

We both stood there, considering.

The cat said, “Hmm?”

We looked over at the carrier.

“Anyhow,” Max said, and he unfastened the two latches and lifted the lid. Instead of stepping out, the cat hunched lower and stared up at me. A gray-and-black tabby with a chunky face. “So I couldn’t think where to go except here,” Max said. “I knew where you hide *your* key. It didn’t occur to me that you would be home on a weekday.”

“Yes, well...,” I said. And then I told the cat, “Hey there.”

She squared her eyes at me.

“What’s her name?” I asked Max.

“I don’t know.”

“What? How could you not know?”

“I’m just the fosterer,” he told me. “I volunteer at this shelter where they need people to foster animals until they can be adopted. Ordinarily it’s kittens, batches of feral kittens that need domesticating first, but this one’s a senior citizen. I’m thinking of naming her ‘Pearl,’ at least for as long as I have her around.”

“Pearl!”

“On account of her color.”

“You can’t name a cat ‘Pearl.’”

“Why not?”

“Cats are so bad at language,” I told him. “They’re not the least bit like dogs. Cats just get your general tone, and ‘Pearl’ has a tone like a growl.”

“It does?”

“So does ‘Ruby.’ So does ‘Rhinestone.’”

“Aha!” Max said. “See there? Everything turns out for the best.”

“It does?” I said. “What are you talking about?”

“You can advise me on cat lore,” he said. “Plus you might even decide to adopt her; who knows?”

“Max,” I said, “sometimes I wonder if you understand the least little thing about me.”

“But you love cats! You used to have that homely little calico cat. And this one’s accustomed to older women.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“‘Older,’ I said. Not ‘old.’”

“I do not want a cat in any way, shape, or form,” I told him.

“What do you think of ‘Mary?’” he asked. “Or ‘Carol.’ How about that?”

“Forget it, Max,” I said. Then I added, “And you want to steer away from the *r* sound. An *r* is a growl, straight out.”

“Oh, right. Yes. Thank you.” He paused. “How about ‘Lucy?’” he said.

“Forget it, I told you.”

He sighed.

“Maybe you could drop her off at a shelter here in Baltimore,” I said. “I mean, surely they wouldn’t refuse her.”

“We’re not allowed to just dump our charges any-old-where,” he told me. “No, I’d better keep her here at your house, and then take her back to Cornboro if you really don’t want her.”

“I most emphatically do not want her,” I said. Then, “Nor do I want a houseguest.”

“Yes, but, see, there’s dander all over my clothes now. I can’t possibly go back to Debbie’s, even without the cat.”

“In fact, I wonder if you should come to the wedding, even,” I said. “Just think if Kenneth starts choking during the vows.”

This was pure mischief, on my part. I seriously doubted that Kenneth would choke; he’d always struck me as a sturdy type of guy.

But Max looked stricken. He said, “Not attend my own daughter’s wedding?”

“Well, you could maybe wear a raincoat,” I said. “Or one of those hazmat suits.”

The kitchen phone rang. We both glanced over at it. It rang again, and then a third time. “Aren’t you going to get that?” Max asked me.

But I was thinking it might be Marilee, and sure enough, after my outgoing message Marilee came on and asked, “Gail? Are you there?”

This was why I still had an actual, physical answering machine: there were too many people I might not feel like talking to.

“Because we really need to discuss this,” Marilee said. “Could you pick up, please?”

Max wrinkled his forehead at me.

“Ignore that,” I told him.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“Okay...”

The answering machine clicked off, and I turned back to the cat. I briefly closed my eyes at her. Cats take that as reassurance; to them it’s like a smile. Then I looked off in another direction. I heard a rustle, and when I slid a glance sideways I saw her unfolding herself from the carrier by degrees and stepping gingerly onto the counter. “A little weight problem,” I murmured.

As if to demonstrate, she landed on the floor with a noticeable thud.

“I think it’s from stress,” Max said. “Apparently she’d been alone for some time before anyone realized her owner had died.”

I made a sympathetic *tsking* sound.

“What’s up with Marilee?” Max asked. He’d never been very good at minding his own business.

I said, "Nothing's up with Marilee."

The cat was heading into the living room now, so I made a big show of following her. She paused to sniff at the fringe on the rug and then padded over to an armchair and sprang into it, more nimbly than you might expect.

"What does she want to discuss?" Max asked, trailing after me.

I gave up. I said, "She's retiring in the fall and she wants the board to hire this other person in her place, this Nashville person. And the Nashville person is asking to bring in her own assistant. So I'm thinking I should just quit before they fire me."

"Excellent," Max said.

I turned to look at him.

"Your great talent is for teaching; you know that," Max said. "Dealing with all the kids who are scared to death of math."

"You're forgetting that teachers make no money, though," I told him. "Why else did I put in all that hell time getting my master's degree?"

"So? Now that Debbie's finished law school, you can go back to doing what you're good at."

"It's not that simple," I told him.

Still, it was nice of him to say that I was good at something.

But then he changed the subject. "Guess I might as well bring in the cat supplies," he said. And he went on outside, leaving the front door open behind him even though the air conditioning was on.

I turned back to the cat. She was a bread-loaf shape in the armchair now with her front paws folded beneath her, and when she saw me looking at her she shut her eyes lazily and then opened them again.

Max came back with a sack of cat kibble stashed in a brown plastic tub, a larger sack of kitty litter swinging from his free hand. "Where do you think for the litter box? Kitchen?" he asked me.

"No, not the kitchen! Good grief! The powder room, I guess."

He headed toward the powder room. Of course the front door was still open. I went over and slammed it shut.

When he returned he had collected his duffel bag from the kitchen, and he started up the stairs with it. "Sheets in the bathroom closet?" he called back to me.

“You won’t need sheets; the bed’s already made up,” I said.

“Ha! It’s a good thing my mother’s not alive,” he said. “You remember how she couldn’t countenance a guest bed with unfresh bedding.”

“Oh, she couldn’t, could she?” I asked in a mocking tone. “She couldn’t ‘countenance’ it, could she?” I was climbing after him; I had just recalled that the bed was covered with old photographs that I’d been going through for a display at Debbie’s reception. “*Manners for the Mystified*,” I said.

“Huh?”

I swept into the guest room ahead of him and started gathering the photos, completely messing up all the sorting I’d been doing. “Why, look at that!” Max said in a marveling tone. “Us at Bethany Beach.”

He had picked up a wallet-size photo that was lying on one pillow, all crinkly-edged like olden times. Max and I very young and unformed, and Debbie as cute as a button in one of those bathing suits with a ballerina skirt. I wasn’t going to use that one; Kenneth’s mother had specified that the photos should be four-by-sixes. Still, Debbie looked so darling! She had those dusty pale freckles she always got in the summer, that magically faded away every year by Thanksgiving. I took the picture from Max and stared down at it. “You should go back to wearing your hair long,” Max told me.

“Mutton dressed as lamb,” I said.

“What?”

I added the photo to my stack of photos and turned to leave the room with them. Then I glanced back at Max. I said, “*You* don’t think I lack people skills, do you?”

“Hmm?” he said.

“Marilee feels I lack people skills.”

“Is that a fact,” he said.

But I could tell he wasn’t paying full attention. He had set his duffel bag on the bed and started unzipping it.

“I mean, I know I’m not Ms. Social Butterfly,” I told him, “but in a lot of ways, I hold that school together! Look at during Covid times: I was the only one who went in to work every day. Dealt with the mail and the service people and even let this one pushy father come in for a tour. With all the windows open, of course.”