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Author of SAINT MAYBE

Celestial Navigation



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CELESTIAL NAVIGATION

Anne Tyler

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Fall, 1960: Amanda

My brother Jeremy is a thirty-eight-year-old bachelor who never did leave home. Long ago we gave up expecting very much of him, but still he is the last man in our family and you would think that in time of tragedy he might pull himself together and take over a few of the responsibilities. Well, he didn't. He telephoned my sister and me in Richmond, where we have a little apartment together. If memory serves me it was the first time in his life he had ever placed a call to us; can you imagine? Ordinarily we phoned Mother every Sunday evening when the rates were down and then she would put Jeremy on the line to say hello. Which was about all he did say: "Hello," and "Fine, thank you," and then a long breathing pause and, "Well, goodbye now." So when I heard his voice that night I had trouble placing it for a moment. "Amanda?" he said, and I said, "Yes? Who is it?"

"I wanted to tell you about Mama," Jeremy said.

That's what he calls her still: Mama. Laura and I switched to Mother when we were grown but Jeremy didn't.

I said, "Jeremy? Is something wrong?"

"Mama has passed on," he told me.

And I said, "Oh, dear Lord in heaven."

Then Laura and I had to make all the arrangements by long distance, had to call the doctor for the death certificate and track down the minister, had to help Jeremy find a fu-

neral parlor. (It seems he had never learned how to work the yellow pages.) Had to catch a train to Baltimore the next day and locate a taxi that would carry us from the station. It didn't occur to Jeremy that at a time like this we might like to be met. What would he have met us *in*, anyway; he had no notion of how to drive. But some men can take things in hand even arriving by city bus, hailing another bus home again and seeing to it their sisters have seats and keeping watch over their bags. Not Jeremy. Laura and I walked out of the station on a rainy cold November noon and found not a single familiar face, not even a redcap in sight, no taxis waiting at the curb. We had to sit shivering on our suitcases, with our feet tucked under us and plastic rainscarves over our hats. "Oh, Amanda," Laura said, "that cold of yours will go straight to your chest." For I had been ill for two weeks before this, just barely managing to continue with my classes, as I distrust substitute teachers. I shouldn't have been out at all. And now Laura looked as if *she* were coming down with something. Folding and refolding a flowered handkerchief, blowing into it and then wiping the tip of her nose. She wore her maroon knit, which was supposed to slim her some but didn't. Bulges showed in the gape of her coat. I was in my good black wool with the rhinestone buttons, and my squirrel-collar coat and my gray bird-wing hat that exactly matches my hair. But I might as well not have bothered. The plastic scarf and the Rain Dears spoiled the effect. Wouldn't you think that Jeremy would at least know how to dial a taxi and have it waiting at the station?

Then when we finally did find a cab there was some confusion about where we wanted to go. Laura said straight to the funeral parlor. She was always closer to Mother than I was and had acted much more emotional about her passing, sat up most of the night before crying and carrying on. Well, Lord knows it was a shock to me as well but I am the oldest—forty-six, though people tell me I don't look it—and I have always been the sensible one. I said we would have to drop our suitcases, wouldn't we? And surely Jeremy would be seeing to things at the funeral parlor. He could manage *that*

much, couldn't he? Laura said, "Oh, well, I don't know, Amanda." So in the end I told her we would go on to the funeral parlor but just stop off first at the house, leave our suitcases and make sure where Jeremy was. The driver said, "Now can we get going?" A put-upon type. But at least he kept quiet, once we were out in traffic. I despise how some taxi drivers will just talk on and on in that tough way they have, giving out their opinions on politics and the cost of living and crime in the streets and other matters I have no interest in.

Our mother's house was smack in the middle of the city on a narrow busy street, one of those thin dark three-storey Baltimore rowhouses. A clutter of leaded panes and straggly ivy and grayish lace curtains dragging their bottoms behind the black screens. The sidewalk leading up to it could break a person's ankle, and yellowy-brown weeds were growing in the cracks. A stained cardboard sign reading "ROOMS TO LET" was propped in the parlor window. The neighborhood was running down, had been for years. Most places had split into apartments and gone over to colored and beatniks, and a few were even boarded up, with city notices plastered across the doors. I told Mother time and time again that she should move but she never got up the energy. She was a *stagnant* kind of person. I hate to say it now she's gone but there you are. She didn't even notice what the neighborhood had turned into. She hardly ever left the house. And over the years all her possessions had piled around her so, her knickknacks and photographs and her shoeboxes full of bits of string. It would have taken three vans just to move her. When we drew up in front of the door I could see the beginnings of her clutter already: the little scrap of a front yard packed with weeds and spiny shrubs and one great long dead rambling rosebush that had woven itself into everything. That will tell you a good deal about the way she looked at things. She caused no changes; that was Mother for you. She hadn't the courage. If she saw that crack snaking through the mortar or the grillwork fence slowly leaning toward the ground, all she

thought was, well, but who am *I* to alter it? I have no patience with people like that.

We climbed the front steps and went into the vestibule, where we found a flowerpot containing a dead twig in a hunk of dry earth. I remembered it from the *last* time we were home, Easter Sunday, and it was dead then. We rang the bell but no one answered. There was a cavelike echo behind the door that gave me a chill. I said, "Evidently Jeremy is out," and Laura said, "Out? Out where?"

"Why, at the funeral parlor, I should *hope*," I said.

So we left our suitcases in the vestibule—we hadn't a house key—and went back to the cab. I told the driver the name of the funeral parlor. He said, "Oh, yes, I know it well. They buried my sister from there." Well, I didn't like the sound of *that*. Just what had Jeremy got us into, anyway? "They do good work," the driver said. Laura and I only looked at each other. We didn't say a thing.

Then when we got there—another rowhouse, but some ten blocks away—and had split the fare between us and decided on the size of the tip, I saw I was right to have worried. There was a neon sign in the yard, blinking on and off and crackling. The windows were sooty and a torn awning dripped rainwater down our necks as we bent to take our galoshes off. And inside! I never saw a place so gloomy. It smelled of dusty radiators. The ceilings were high and flaky, the walls that shade you see in hospitals—either a faded yellow or a yellowed white, you never can be sure. The carpet was worn bald. An usher made his way across it with his run-down loafers dragging. "We are Mrs. Pauling's daughters," I told him. He nodded and turned to lead us down a corridor, past a string of rooms where people were standing around looking unsure of what to do next. Laura hung onto my arm. I could feel her trembling. Well, I was quite a bit shaky myself, I admit it. It seemed to me that Mother had allowed herself to slip down yet another rung, continuing even after death and ending up in a place that had decayed even worse than her own. All that sustained me was that Jeremy would be waiting for us—a man, at least, whatever you might say, and our last

blood relation, someone to share our trouble. But when we reached the end of the corridor, what did we find? An empty room, a casket sitting unattended. Bleak white light slanting through an uncurtained window. "Where's—" I said. But the usher had gone already. They have no sense of how to do things in these places.

They had laid Mother out in a brass-handled casket, a wooden one. Mahogany, I believe. Her head was on a satin pillow. Her hair, which had stayed light brown but grown thin and dull, was set into little crimps, and for once she wore no net on it. She always used to—a light brown cobweb that I itched to snatch off her. A cobweb and a wispy dress with all the life gone out of it and chintz mules that whispered when she walked. Well, now they had put her into the navy wool that I sent her for her last birthday. "Thank you so much for my pretty new suit," she wrote when she received it, "though as you know I don't go out much and will probably have no occasion to wear it." Her face was set in a faint, sweet smile, with her withered cheeks sagging back toward the pillow and her eyelids puckery. You hear people say, at funerals, "How natural she looks! As though she were asleep." And most of the time they are telling a falsehood, but in Mother's case it was absolutely true. Of *course* she looked natural; why not, when she went through life looking dead? Even her hands were right: crossed on her chest, blue-white, waxy at the fingertips. She always did have poor circulation. She always did keep her hands folded in that meek and retiring way, never so much as fidgeting, boneless and nerveless as some floppy cloth doll. On her left hand was a white gold wedding ring, which any woman of spirit would have thrown away years ago but not, of course, our mother. She kept it on. Inertia. She probably forgot it was there. Now for some reason my eyes got fixed on it, and I stared and failed to realize that Laura was crying until I heard her snuffle. I turned and saw her face curling in upon itself while the tears rolled down her cheeks. "Oh, Amanda," she said, "how will we ever manage now that Mother's gone?"

"Now, Laura. It's not as if—"

"We shouldn't have left her alone so much. Should we? We should have gone to visit her more, and paid her more attention."

"*Jeremy* was the one she cared about," I said, "and he was here all along. We don't have anything to blame ourselves for."

"Jeremy will be just devastated," Laura said. She patted her eyes with her little flowered handkerchief, which was already sopping wet. "You know how attached they were. Oh, what will he do now? How will he get along?"

"Where is he, first of all," I said, and I left Laura crying by the casket and went off to find the manager. His office was by the front door. He was seated at his desk, drinking coffee from a paper cup that he hid as soon as he saw me. "Yes!" he said. "May I be of assistance?"

"I am Miss Pauling, and I wonder if you can tell me where my brother is."

He looked over at the usher, who was leaning against the wall. "Brother?" said the usher.

"That would be *Mr. Pauling*," the manager said. "Yes, well, we saw him of course when we came to the house to—but he seemed, he didn't seem—but he did help us pick out the clothing. We like to have a family member do that, I told him, though at first he was reluctant. Family members know what would be most—"

"But where is he *now*," I said.

"Oh, why, that I don't know."

"Hasn't he been by here?"

The manager looked at the usher again, and the usher shook his head.

"Just some ladies," he told me. "From her church, I think they said."

"Hasn't he come here at *all*?"

"Not as I know of."

"Well, for goodness' sake," I said. I turned and left, with the usher suddenly uprooted from his wall and scurrying along behind me. "Oh, leave me be, go see to someone else," I told him. "We are surely not the *only* dead in this

house.” Then I went back to the room where Mother was, where Laura was just searching her handkerchief in hopes of a dry corner. I handed her a clean one from my purse. “Jeremy has not been here,” I told her.

“Oh no, I didn’t think he would be.”

“Did you ever hear of a son not keeping watch by his mother’s remains?”

“Oh, well, you know how—I just expected him to be at home,” Laura said. “I hope he isn’t in some kind of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble would *Jeremy* be in?” I asked her, and naturally she couldn’t think of an answer. There are no surprises in Jeremy. He will never go on a drinking spree, or commit any crimes, or be found living under an alias in some far-distant city. “Most likely he is holed up in his studio,” I told her. “We should have rung the doorbell longer. Well, never mind.” For to tell the truth I was just as glad. It would have been more hindrance than help to have him moping around here. He was even closer to Mother than Laura was. They knew each other so well they barely needed to speak; they spent every evening of their lives together, huddled in that dim little parlor watching TV and drinking cocoa. I have never understood how people can live that way.

We stayed the afternoon in the loveseat out in the corridor and greeted visitors, such as they were. Mother’s circle of friends seemed to have closed in considerably. Those who came were mighty brief about it. A moment of silence by the casket, a word to us, a signature in the guestbook, and then they left again. Just doing their duty. Well, I have always said it doesn’t cost a thing to perform a duty *pleasantly*, once you are at it, but these people seemed to be thinking of other matters and I could tell their hearts weren’t in it. In between visits Laura and I sat without saying anything, side by side. Our arms were touching; we had no choice. The loveseat was very small. I hate to be touched. Laura was all the time twisting her purse straps or fiddling with its clasp, so that her

elbow rubbed against my sleeve with a felty sound that made me jumpy. “Sit *still*, will you?” I said.

“Oh, Amanda, I feel so lost in this place.”

“Get ahold of yourself,” I told her. Her chin was denting. I reached out and squeezed her hand and said, “Never mind, we’ll go to the house soon and have a cup of tea. You’re tired is all.”

“It’s true, I am,” she said. She has never had as much energy as I.

Two ladies from Mother’s church dropped by. I knew their faces but had to cover up that I’d forgotten their names. Then Mother’s minister, and then Mrs. Jarrett, who has been a boarder at the house for years. A woman of quality, very gracious and genteel. She always wears a hat. She held out a gloved hand and said, “I shall think of your mother often, Miss Pauling, and remember her in my prayers. She was a very sweet person.” Now, why couldn’t all boarders be like that? Right on her heels came Miss Vinton, a faded stringy type who rents the south rear bedroom. The smallest room in the house; Mother charged less for it. “I’m sorry about your mother,” Miss Vinton said, but if she was so sorry you’d think she would have dressed to show it. She wore what she always does, a lavender cardigan over a gray tube of a dress, baggy mackintosh, boatlike Mary Janes on her great long feet. She shook hands like a man, bony hands with straightedged nails and nicotine stains. Rides a bicycle everywhere she goes. *You* know the kind. “Well, it was very thoughtful of you to come, Miss Vinton,” I said, but meanwhile I threw a good sharp glance at her clothing to show I had taken it in. If she noticed, she didn’t care. Just gave me a horse-toothed smile. I suppose she thinks we have something in common, both being spinsters in our forties, but thank heaven that is where the resemblance ends. I have always taken care to keep my dignity intact.

At six in the evening we went home. The streets were black and wet, with no taxi in sight. We walked all ten blocks. Laura was crying again. She kept blowing her nose and mur-

muring little things I couldn't hear, what with the traffic swishing by and my rainscarf crackling, but I don't imagine that I missed anything. Instead of answering I just marched along, keeping tight hold of my purse and watching for puddles. Even so, my stockings got spattered. The rowhouses had been darkened by the rain and looked meaner and grimmer than ever.

Then to top it off, Mother's place still seemed deserted. The only lit window was on the second floor. There was the same echo when we rang the doorbell. Laura said, "Oh, what if we're locked out? Where will we stay?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I told her. "This house is teeming with boarders, if nothing else, and you can see that someone's been and taken our suitcases in." For the vestibule was bare again. Nothing remained but the flowerpot.

I put my finger on the doorbell and held it there. Eventually a light came on in the hallway, and then we saw a shadow behind the lace curtain. Mr. Somerset, hitching up his suspenders as he shuffled toward us. I knew him by his bent-kneed walk and his rounded shoulders. He was as familiar to me as some elderly uncle, though no uncle I ever asked for. "Now this," I told Mother once, "is what I mean about your borders, Mother: Mr. Somerset is a depressing old man and I don't know why you've put up with him so long." "Yes, but all he has is his pension, poor man," she said. She didn't mean that. She meant, How will I tell him to go? How will I get used to someone new? Can't we just let things stay as they are?

"Miss Pauling," Mr. Somerset said. "And Mrs. Bates. You've come about your mother, I reckon."

"Why, yes, we have," I said, "and we've been all afternoon at the funeral parlor without seeing a sign of Jeremy. Now, where might he be, Mr. Somerset?"

"He's setting on the stairs," he said.

"On the stairs?"

"On the stairs where your mother passed. He's been there all day."

"We came before now, Mr. Somerset. At noon. We rang the doorbell."

"I must've been out."

"My *brother* was here, you say."

"He don't answer doorbells," said Mr. Somerset, "and he don't move from where he's at. Sets in the dark."

"For mercy's sake," I said. "Jeremy?"

But it was Laura who went to find him, running up the stairs with her galoshes still on. I heard her flick a light switch, start on up toward the third floor calling, "Jeremy, honey!"

"He's not himself at all today," Mr. Somerset told me.

People say that about Jeremy quite often, but what they mean is that he is not like other people. He is *always* himself. That's what's wrong with him. I called, "Jeremy, come down here please. Laura and I have been looking for you."

"He won't," said Mr. Somerset. "He's setting on the step where—"

"She passed on the *stairs*?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, of all places!"

"Way I heard it, he sat by her side till Mrs. Jarrett come home. *Hours* maybe. Nobody knows. It was Mrs. Jarrett dialed your number on the telephone. Otherwise he might never have done so. And then she sent him to bed, for after the fuss with the funeral parlor and the doctor and so on he just come right back to that step up yonder, planning on passing the night there, I believe. Mrs. Jarrett said, 'Mr. Pauling, I think you should lie down on a regular bed now,' and he did. But I noticed this morning he was setting on the stairs again, sat there all day. I told Miss Vinton that. She said let him be. I said how long were we supposed to let him be? 'This is not *natural*, Miss Vinton,' I told her, but she wouldn't—"

"Well, he's come to the end of *that*," I said, and I took off my Rain Dears and hung my coat and hat in the closet and went upstairs. I crossed the second floor hallway, which smelled of damp towels. I climbed on to the third floor,

where Jeremy works and sleeps all alone, seldom letting other people in. There he was, hunched over on the uppermost step, with Laura crouching beside him. She was out of breath; she never takes exercise. "Jeremy, honey, you don't know how worried I was," she was telling him. "Why, we rang and rang! I thought for certain you would be here."

"I was sitting on the stairs," Jeremy said.

"So I hear," I said, climbing till my face was even with his. "The *least* I expected was to see you at the funeral parlor."

"Oh, no."

"Well, you'll have to come downstairs now," I told him.

"I don't believe I feel like it just now, Amanda."

"Did I ask if you felt like it?"

He spread his fingers and looked at the bitten nails, not answering. Speak sharply to Jeremy and you will bowl him over; he can't stand up to things. You'll get further being gentle with him, but I always remember that too late. He puts me in a fury. I don't see how he could let himself go the way he has. No, letting yourself go means you had to be something to start with, and Jeremy never was anything. He was born like this. He is, and always has been, pale and doughy and overweight, pear-shaped, wide-hipped. He toes out when he walks. His hair is curly and silvery-gold, thin on top. His eyes are nearly colorless. (People have asked me if he is an albino.) There is no telling where he manages to find his clothes: baggy slacks that start just below his armpits; mole-colored cardigan strained across his stomach and buttoning only in the middle, exposing a yellowed fishnet undershirt top and bottom, and tiny round-toed saddle oxfords. Saddle oxfords? For a man? "Pull yourself together, Jeremy," I said, and he blinked up at me with his lashless, puffy eyes.

"She's only concerned for you," Laura told him.

"I'm concerned for all of us," I said. "How would it be if everyone just sat in one place when they didn't feel like moving?"

"In a while I will move," Jeremy said.

“At the funeral parlor they said they hadn’t seen a sign of you.”

“No.”

“Said you hadn’t even stopped in to check on how they laid her out.”

“I couldn’t manage it,” Jeremy said.

“We managed, didn’t we?”

“She looked very peaceful,” Laura said. She had leaned forward to grasp both his shoulders. He gave the impression that if she let go he would crumple very slowly to one side with his eyes still wide and staring. “You might think she was just asleep,” she told him.

“She fell asleep over solitaire a lot,” Jeremy said.

“She looks as pretty as her wedding picture.”

Now, where did she get that? Mother looked nothing like her wedding picture. It would have been mighty strange if she had. But all Jeremy said was, “The one in the album?”

“That’s the one.”

“Her face was kind of full in that picture,” Jeremy said.

“Her face is full *now*.”

“I suppose they have some way of doing that.”

“Her color is good, too.”

“Does she have a bit of color?”

“They’ve put on rouge, I imagine. Nothing *garish*, though. Just enough to—and they’ve waved her hair.”

“*Mama* never waved it.”

“Yes, but it looks just lovely, Jeremy. And that dress, it sets off her complexion. Did *you* choose the dress? You did just fine. I think I might have picked the flowered beige, the one she always wore at Easter, but this is nice too, and the color sets off her—”

“The funeral man suggested that,” Jeremy said.

“I suppose he knows about these things.”

“I had to go looking for clothes in her closet.”

“Really. And then the way they’ve done her—”

“Had to push down all the rack of things in her closet.”

“Yes, I know.”

“They told me I had to,” Jeremy said. “I said, couldn’t

they do it? They said no. They were scared they would get into trouble somehow, be accused of choosing wrong or maybe even stealing, I guess, if anything turned up missing. But *I* wouldn't do that. I wouldn't accuse them."

"No, of course not," Laura said.

"I had to slide down all the rack of dresses in her closet."

"Yes, well."

"I had to find some, find her undergarments in the bureau. Open up her bureau."

"Well, Jeremy."

"Go through her bureau drawers taking things out."

"Jeremy, honey. There, now. There, there."

For Jeremy just then leaned over and against Laura, set his head alongside that pillow of a bosom. And there sat Laura patting his back and clicking her teeth. She always did pamper that boy. Well, she was only seven when he was born—the age when you look at a baby brother as some kind of super-special doll. It never occurred to her that she was being displaced in Mother's affection. It occurred to *me*, of course. I was the oldest. I had been displaced years ago. I saw how Mother had room for only one person at a time, and that one the youngest and smallest and weakest. I saw how, while she was expecting Jeremy, she curled more and more inside herself until she was only a kind of circular hollow taking in nourishment and asking for afghans. In all other situations Mother was a *receiver*, requesting and expecting even from her own daughters without ever giving anything out, but she spoiled Jeremy from the moment he was born and I believe that that is the root of all his troubles. A mama's boy. She preferred him over everyone. She gave him the best of her food and the whole of her attention, kept him home from school for weeks at a time if he so much as complained of a stomach ache, which he was forever doing; read to him for hours while he sat wrapped in a comforter—oh, I can see it still! Jeremy on the windowseat, pasty and puffy-faced, Mother reading him Victorian ladies' novels in her fading whispery voice although she *never* felt quite up to reading to us girls. By this time our father had left us, but I

don't believe she truly noticed. She was too wrapped up in Jeremy. She thought the sun rose and set in him. She thought he was a genius. (I myself have sometimes wondered if he isn't a little bit retarded. Some sort of selective, unclassified retardation that no medical book has yet put its finger on.) He failed math, he failed public speaking (of course), he went through eighth grade *twice* but he happened to be artistic so Mother thought he was a genius. "Some people just don't have mathematical minds," she said, and she showed us his report card—A+ in art, A in English, and A+ in deportment. (What else? He had no friends, there was no one he could have whispered with in class.) This was when we were in college, working our way through teachers college waiting tables and living at home and wearing hand-me-downs, and he was still in high school. When he graduated—by proxy, claiming a stomach ache, not up to facing a solitary march across the stage to receive his diploma—where did he go? The finest art school in Baltimore, with Mother selling off half her ground rents to pay the tuition. And he was miserable for every minute of it. Couldn't stand the pressure. Scared of the other students. Stomach was bothering him. He lost one whole semester over something that might or might not have been mononucleosis. (In those days we called it glandular fever.) And even in good health, he rarely went to class. He would come home halfway through the morning and crawl into bed. What can you say to someone like that? What *Mother* said was, "Those people are just asking too much of you, Jeremy." Then she made him all his favorite foods for lunch. (His favorite dessert is custard. Boiled custard.) Well, they did like his work, it seems. They gave him top grades and let him graduate. But even after that, he had no way to make a living. Can you imagine Jeremy teaching a class? Finally Mother gathered up strength to place a permanent ad in the newspaper: *Trained artist willing to give private lessons in his studio*. His studio was the entire third floor, which she had turned over to him without a thought. It had a skylight. Every now and then some poor failure of a pupil might ring the doorbell—girls mostly, anemic stringy-