ANNE TYLER

Author of SAINT MAYBE

Searching for Caleb

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SEARCHING FOR CALEB

Anne Tyler

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The fortune teller and her grandfather went to New York City on an Amtrak train, racketing along with their identical, peaky white faces set due north. The grandfather had left his hearing aid at home on the bureau. He wore a black suit, pearl-gray suspenders, and a very old-fashioned, expensive-looking pinstriped collarless shirt. No matter what happened he kept his deep-socketed eyes fixed upon the seat in front of him, he continued sliding a thumb over the news clipping he held in his hand. Either the train had turned his deafness absolute or else he had something very serious on his mind, it was hard to tell which. In any case, he would not answer the few things the fortune teller said to him.

Past his downy white head, outside the scummy window, factories and warehouses streamed along. Occasionally a leftover forest would coast into view and then out again—twisted bare trees, trunks ripped by lightning, logs covered with vines, tangled raspy bushes and beer cans, whisky bottles, rusted carburetors, sewing machines, and armchairs. Then some town or other would take over. Men wearing several layers of jackets struggled with crates and barrels on loading docks, their breaths trailing out of their mouths in white tatters. It was January, and cold enough to make the brick buildings appear to darken and condense.

The fortune teller, who was not a gypsy or even Spanish but a lanky, weedy blond woman in a Breton hat and a faded shift, took a *National Geographic* from a straw bag on the floor and started reading it from back to front. She flicked

the pages after barely a glance, rapidly swinging one crossed foot. Half-way through the magazine she bent to rummage through the bag again. She felt her grandfather slide his eyes over to see what she was keeping there. Tarot cards? A crystal ball? Some other tool of her mysterious, disreputable profession? But all she showed was a spill of multicolored kerchief and then a box of Luden's cough drops, which she took out and offered him. He refused. She put one in her mouth, giving him a sudden smile that completely upturned every one of her pale, straight features. Her grandfather absorbed it but forgot to smile back. He returned to his view of the seat ahead, a button-on antimacassar with an old lady's netted hat just beyond.

In his hand, stroked by his puckered thumb, the newspaper clipping first rustled and then wilted and dropped, but the fortune teller knew it by heart anyway.

TABOR

Suddenly on December 18, 1972, Paul Jeffrey, Sr., of New York City, formerly of Baltimore. Beloved husband of Deborah Palmer Tabor. Father of Paul J. Tabor, Jr., of Chicago and Theresa T. Hanes of Springline, Massachusetts. Also survived by five grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

Services will be held Thursday at the . . .

"My throat is dry, Justine," her grandfather said.

"I'll get you a soda."

"What?"

"A *soda*."

He drew back, offended. No telling what he thought she had said. Justine patted his hand and told him, "Never mind, Grandfather. I'll just be gone a minute."

She left, sidling between shopping bags and weekend cases along the narrow aisle, holding tight to her saucerlike hat. Three cars up, she paid for two root beers and a sack of Cheez Doodles. She returned walking carefully, opening

doors with her elbows and frowning at the plastic cups, which were filled to the brim. Just inside her own car, the Cheez Doodles fell and a man in a business suit had to pick them up for her. "Oh! Thank you!" she said, and smiled at him, her cheeks grown suddenly pink. At first glance she could be taken for a young girl, but then people saw the fine lines beginning to show in her skin, and the faded blue of her eyes and the veined, parched, forty-year-old hands with the scratched wedding band looking three sizes too large below one knobby knuckle. She had a ramshackle way of walking and a sharp, merry voice. "*Root* beer, Grandfather!" she sang out. If he didn't hear her, all the rest of the car did.

She put a cup in his hand, and he took a sip. "Ah yes," he said. He liked herby things, root beer and horehound drops and sassafras tea. But when she tore open the cellophane bag and presented him with a Cheez Doodle—a fat orange worm that left crystals on his fingertips—he frowned at it from beneath a tangle of white eyebrows. He had once been a judge. He still gave the impression of judging everything that came his way. "What *is* this," he said, but that was a verdict, not a question.

"It's a Cheez Doodle, Grandfather, try it and see."

"What's that you say?"

She held out the bag, showing him the lettering on the side. First he replaced the Cheez Doodle and then he wiped his fingers on a handkerchief he took from his pocket. Then he went back to drinking root beer and studying the clipping, which he had laid flat on one narrow, triangular knee. "Theresa," he said. "I never cared for that name."

Justine nodded, chewing.

"I don't like *difficult* names. I don't like foreignness."

"Perhaps they're Catholic," Justine said.

"How's that?"

"Perhaps they're Catholic."

"I didn't quite hear."

"*Catholic!*"

Faces spun around.

"Don't be ridiculous," her grandfather said. "Paul Tabor went to the same church I did, he was in my brother's Sunday school class. The two of them graduated from the Salter Academy together. Then this—dissatisfaction set in. This, this *newness*. I can't tell you how many times I've seen it come to pass. A young man goes to a distant city instead of staying close to home, he gets a job, switches friends, widens his circle of acquaintances. Marries a girl from a family no one knows, lives in a house of unusual architecture, names his children foreign names that never were in his family in any preceding generation. He takes to traveling, buys winter homes and summer homes and vacation cottages in godforsaken states like Florida where none of us has ever been. Meanwhile his parents die and all his people just seem to vanish, there's no one you can ask any more, 'Now, what is Paul up to these days?' Then he dies himself, most likely in a very large city where there's nobody to notice, only his wife and his barber and his tailor and maybe not even the last two, and what's it for? What's it all about? Now in Paul's case I just couldn't say for certain, of course. He was my brother's friend, not mine. However I will hazard a guess: he had no *stamina*. He couldn't endure, he wouldn't stay around to fight it out or live it down or sit it through, whatever was required. He hadn't the patience. He wanted something new, something different, he couldn't quite name it. He thought things would be better somewhere else. Anywhere else. And what did it get him? Watch, next time I'm in Baltimore I'll tell the family, 'Paul Tabor died.' 'Paul *who?*' they'll say. 'Paul Tabor, it was in the Baltimore *Sun*. Don't you read it any more? Don't you know?' Well, of course they do read it and would catch any familiar name in a flash but not Paul Tabor's. Forgotten, all forgotten. He discarded us, now he's dead and forgotten. Hear what I say, Justine. Do you hear?"

Justine smiled at him. "I hear," she said.

She had moved away from Baltimore herself. She and her husband and daughter now lived in Semple, Virginia; in an-

other place last year and another the year before that. (Her husband was a restless man.) Next week they were moving to Caro Mill, Maryland. Was it Caro Mill? Caro Mills? Sometimes all these places would run together in her mind. She would mentally locate friends in towns those friends had never set foot in, she would await a visit from a client whom she had left two years ago without a forwarding address. She would ransack the telephone book for a doctor or a dentist or a plumber who was actually three hundred miles away and three or four or fourteen years in the past. Her grandfather didn't guess that, probably. Or care. He had scarcely bothered to learn the towns' names in the first place. Although he lived with Justine and made all those moves with her he called it visiting; he considered himself a citizen still of Baltimore, his birthplace. All other towns were ephemeral, no-account; he shuffled through them absent-mindedly like a man passing a string of shanties on the way to his own sturdy house. When he arrived in Baltimore (for Thanksgiving or Christmas or the Fourth of July) he would heave a sigh and lower the sharp narrow shoulders that he held, at all other times, so tightly hunched. The brackets around his mouth would relax somewhat. He would set his old leather suitcase down with finality, as if it held all his earthly goods and not just a shirt and a change of underwear and a scruffy toothbrush. "There's no place in the world like Baltimore, Maryland," he would say.

He said it now.

This morning they had passed through the Baltimore railroad station, even stopping a moment to let other, luckier passengers alight. The thought of having come so near must have made him melancholy. He looked down at his clipping now and shook his head, maybe even regretting this trip, which had been entirely his own idea. But when Justine said, "Are you tired, Grandfather?"—thinning her voice to that special, carrying tone he would be certain to hear—he only looked at her blankly. It seemed that his mind was on Paul Tabor again.

"They don't say a word about where they buried him," he said.

"Oh well, I imagine—"

"If you died in New York City, where would you be buried?"

"I'm sure they have—"

"No doubt they ship you someplace else," he said. He turned his face to the window. Without his hearing aid he gave an impression of rudeness. He interrupted people and changed the subject willfully and spoke in a particularly loud, flat voice, although normally he was so well-mannered that he caused others to feel awkward. "I never made the acquaintance of Paul's wife," he said, while Justine was still considering cemeteries. "I don't recollect even hearing when he got married. But then he was younger than I of course and moved in different circles. Or perhaps he married late in life. Now if I had known the wife I would have gone up for the funeral, then asked my questions afterwards. But as it is, I hesitated to barge in upon a family affair and immediately put my case. It would look so—it would seem so self-serving. Do you think I did right to wait?"

He had asked her this before. He didn't listen for the answer.

"By now she will be calmer," he said. "Not so likely to break down at any mention of his name."

He folded the clipping suddenly, as if he had decided something. He creased it with one broad yellow thumbnail.

"Justine," he said.

"Hmm?"

"Am I going to be successful?"

She stopped swirling the ice in her cup and looked at him. "Oh," she said. "Why—I'm certain you are. Certainly, Grandfather. Maybe not *this* time, maybe not right away, but—"

"Truly. Tell me."

"Certainly you will."

He was looking too closely into her face. Possibly he hadn't

heard her. She set her voice to the proper tone and said, "I'm sure that—"

"Justine, how much do you know?"

"What?"

"This telling fortunes. This bunk. This—*piffle*," said her grandfather, and he brushed something violently off his sleeve. "I hate the very thought of it."

"You've told me all that, Grandfather."

"It's not respectable. Your aunts go into a state whenever we speak of it. You know what people call you? 'The fortune teller.' Like 'the cleaner,' 'the greengrocer.' 'How's that granddaughter of yours, Judge Peck, the fortune teller. How's she doing?' Ah, it turns my stomach."

Justine picked up her magazine and opened to a page, any page.

"But, Justine," her grandfather said, "I ask you this. Is there anything to it at all?"

Her eyes snagged on a line of print.

"Do you really have some inkling of the future?"

She shut the magazine. He locked her in a fierce, steady frown; his intensity made everything around him seem pale.

"I want to know if I will find my brother," he said.

Yet immediately afterward he turned away, watching the train's descent into the blackness beneath Manhattan. And Justine repacked her straw bag and brushed cheese crumbs off her lap and put her coat on, her expression calm and cheerful. Neither one of them appeared to be waiting for anything more to be said.

Because they were trying to save money, they took the subway from Penn Station. Justine loved subways. She enjoyed standing on them, gripping a warm, oily metal pole, feet planted slightly apart and knees dipping with the roll of the train as they careened through the darkness. But her grandfather distrusted them, and once they were off the shuttle and onto the IRT, he made her sit down. He continually rotated his face, scanning the car for enemies. Silent young

people returned his stare. "I don't know, Justine, I don't know what's happening. I don't like this city at all any more," her grandfather said. But Justine was enjoying herself too much to answer. She watched each station as they drew into it, the murky light and bathroom-tile walls and those mysterious, grimy men who sat on benches, one or two at every stop, watching trains come and go without ever boarding one. Then when they were moving again she drank in the sensation of speed. *Getting* somewhere. She loved going fast in any kind of vehicle. She particularly liked the rickety sound of these tracks, on which something unexpected might happen at any moment. She hoped the wheels would howl in that eerie way they had while heading through the deepest stretch of darkness. Once the lights went out and when they came on again her face was surprised and joyous, open-mouthed; everybody noticed. Her grandfather touched her wrist.

"Are you watching for the proper station?" he asked.

"Oh yes."

Although she hadn't been.

Clutched in her hand was Mrs. Tabor's address, which she had copied from a telephone book. She had suggested calling ahead from Penn Station, but her grandfather refused. He was too impatient, or he wanted to hold onto his hopes just a little bit longer, or he was afraid of being turned away. Also he might have been anxious to reach Mrs. Tabor's bathroom. He preferred not to use any public facilities.

When they were above ground again—Justine taking gulps of the ashy, foreign air, the old man limp with relief—they walked a block and a half west and entered a gray building with a revolving door. "Look," her grandfather said. "Wood for the door and polished handles. Marble floor. I like old buildings. I like places like this." And he nodded to a lady just stepping out of the elevator—the first person in all New York whose existence he had recognized. He was disappointed, however, that the elevator was self-service. "*Once* upon a time they would have had a boy to do this," he said,

watching Justine jab a button. The elevator toiled upward, creaking and sighing. Its walls were fine oak but on one panel there was a concentration of four-letter words that the old man covered immediately, stepping square in front of them without appearing to notice and then staring upward. Justine smiled at him. He pursed his lips and studied an inspection certificate.

On the eighth floor, at the end of a long dark hall, they pressed another button. Bolts slithered and locks rattled, as if connected somehow to the button. The door opened three inches and a roughed, seamed face peered out from behind a police chain. "Yes?" she asked.

"Mrs. Tabor?" said Justine.

Puffy eyes took her in from top to toe, her streaky ribbons of hair and her brown coat with the uneven hemline. "What is this," Mrs. Tabor said, "are you selling something? I don't need a thing and I already have religion."

So the grandfather had to step up and take over. There was no mistaking the elegance of his bow, or the way he raised one hand to his head even though he wore no hat. He presented her with his card. Not his business card, oh no, but his calling card, cream-colored, aged yellow around the edges. He slipped it beneath the police chain into her jeweled hand. "Daniel Peck," he said, as if she could not read, and she looked up into his face while one finger tested the engraving. "Peck," she said.

"I knew your husband. Paul? Back in Baltimore."

"Why didn't you *say* so?" she asked, and she unhooked the chain and stood back to let them in. They entered a room that Justine might have grown up in, all wine-colored and velvety, giving off a scent of dust although every piece of furniture gleamed. Mrs. Tabor's white hair was precisely finger-waved, webby with beauty parlor hairspray. She wore black wool and ropes and ropes of pearls. Her focus was on the old man and she barely looked at Justine even when he remembered to introduce her. "Of course you do know about his passing, Mr. Peck," she said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You'll have to speak up," said Justine. "He left his hearing aid at home."

"You know he *passed*, Mr. Peck."

"Oh. Passed. Oh yes. Yes, naturally, I read it in the paper. You see we hadn't heard of Paul for many many years, we—" He followed, absently, to the couch where she led him. He sat down beside Justine, pinching the creases in his trousers. "We had no idea where he might be until that death notice, Mrs. Tabor. Why, I've made several trips to New York in my life and never even knew he was here! Never guessed! We could have talked over old times together."

"Oh, it's sad how people lose track," said Mrs. Tabor.

"Well, I wanted to offer my condolences. Our family thought highly of Paul and my brother Caleb in particular was very close to him."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Peck. It was painless, I'm happy to say, sudden and painless, just the way he would have wished it. All the more shock to *me*, therefore, but—"

"What was that?"

"*Thank* you."

"My brother's name was Caleb Peck."

"What a fine old-fashioned name," said Mrs. Tabor.

The old man looked at her for a minute, perhaps wondering whether it was worthwhile asking her to repeat herself. Then he sighed and shook his head. "I don't suppose you knew him, did you?" he said.

"Why, not that I remember, no. I don't believe so. Because of Paul's work we moved about so, you see. It was difficult to—"

"What? What?"

"*No*, Grandfather," Justine said, and laid one hand on top of his. He looked at her dimly for a moment, as if he didn't recognize her.

"I assumed he might have kept in touch with Paul," he told Mrs. Tabor. "Written, or sent Christmas cards. Or vis-

ited, even. You know they were very close. Perhaps he stopped to see you on his way to someplace else."

"We never had many visitors, Mr. Peck."

"Pardon?"

He looked at Justine. Justine shook her head.

"Or possibly Paul just mentioned his *name* on some occasion," he said.

"Possibly, yes, but—"

"Yes?"

He snatched his hand from Justine's and sat forward. "When would that have been?" he asked.

"But—no, Mr. Peck, I can't say I remember it. I'm sorry."

"Look here," he said. He searched a pocket and came up with something—a small brown photograph framed in gold. He leaned over to jab it in her face. "Don't you know him? Doesn't he look familiar in any way? Take your time. Don't be in a hurry to say no."

Mrs. Tabor seemed a little startled by the picture, but it took her only a second to make up her mind. "I'm sorry," she said. Then she looked at Justine. "I don't understand. Is this important in some way?"

"Well—" said Justine.

"We've lost track of Caleb too, you see," her grandfather said. He shoved the photograph back in his pocket. He turned down the corners of his mouth in a bitter smile. "You must think we're very careless people."

Mrs. Tabor did not smile back.

"However it was no more our fault in this case than in Paul's; he left us."

"Oh, what a pity," Mrs. Tabor said.

"Our family is very close knit, a *fine* family, we have always stuck together, but I don't know, periodically some . . . *explorer* sets out on his own." He scowled suddenly at Justine. "The last time I saw Caleb was in nineteen twelve. I have never heard of him since."

"Nineteen twelve!" Mrs. Tabor said. She sank back in her chair. Wheels seemed to be clicking in her head. When

she spoke next her voice had become softer and sadder. "Mr. Peck, I'm so very sorry that I can't help you. I *wish* I could. Might I offer you some tea?"

"How's that?" he said.

"*Tea*, Grandfather."

"Tea. Oh. Well . . ."

This time when he looked at Justine he was handing the rest of the visit to her, and she straightened and clutched her carry-all. "Thank you, but I don't think so," she said. Phrases her mother had taught her thirty years ago came wisping back to her. "It's kind of you to . . . but we really must be . . . however, I wonder if my grandfather might freshen up first? He just got off the train and he . . ."

"Surely," said Mrs. Tabor. "Mr. Peck, may I show you the way?"

She beckoned to him and he rose without question, either guessing at where she was leading him or no longer caring. He followed her through a polished door that swept open with a hushing sound across the carpet. He went down a short hall with his hands by his sides, like a child being sent to his room. When she pointed him toward another door he stepped through it and vanished, not looking around. Mrs. Tabor returned to the living room with careful, outward-turned steps.

"That poor, poor man," she said.

Justine would not answer.

"And will you be in New York long?"

"Just till we find a train home again."

Mrs. Tabor stopped patting her pearls. "You mean you only came for this?"

"Oh, we're used to it, we do it often," Justine said.

"Often! You go looking for his *brother* often?"

"Whenever we have some kind of lead," said Justine. "Some name or letter or something. We've been at this several years now. Grandfather takes it very seriously."

"He'll never find him, of course," said Mrs. Tabor.

Justine was silent.

"Will he?"

"Maybe he will."

"But—nineteen *twelve!* I mean—"

"Our family tends to live a long time," Justine said.

"But even so! And of course, dear," she said, leaning forward suddenly, "it must be hard on *you*."

"Oh no."

"All that wandering around? I'd lose my mind. And he can't be so easy to travel with, his handicap and all. It must be a terrible burden for you."

"I love him very much," said Justine.

"Oh, well yes. Naturally!"

But the mention of love had turned Mrs. Tabor breathless, and she seemed delighted to hear the bathroom door clicking open. "Well, now!" she said, turning to Justine's grandfather.

He came into the room searching all his pockets, a sign he was preparing to leave a place. Justine rose and hoisted her straw bag. "Thank you, Mrs. Tabor," she said. "I'm sorry about your husband. I hope we haven't put you to any trouble."

"No, no."

The grandfather ducked his head in the doorway. "If you should recollect at some later date . . ." he said.

"I'll let you know."

"I wrote my Baltimore number on my calling card. Justine has no phone. If you should chance to think of something, anything at all . . ."

"Will do, Mr. Peck," she said, suddenly jaunty.

"You do?"

"What?"

"She *will* do. Grandfather," Justine said, and led him into the hall. But he did not hear and was still turned to Mrs. Tabor, puzzled and unhappy, when the door swung shut and the locks began tumbling into place again.

* * *

In the railroad station they sat on a wooden bench, waiting for the next train home. Justine ate a sack of Fritos, a Baby Ruth, and two hot dogs; her grandfather would not take anything. Neither of them liked Cokes and they could not find any root beer so they drank warm, bleachy New York water begged from a concession stand. Justine finished the last of her cough drops. She had to go buy more, paying too much for them at a vending machine. When she came back she found that her grandfather had fallen asleep with his head tipped back and his mouth open, his empty hands curled at his sides. She moved some sailor's unattended seabag over next to him and adjusted his head to rest upon it. Then she opened her carry-all and took out magazines, scarves, a coin purse, road maps and unmailed letters and a snaggle-toothed comb and a clutch of candy wrappers, until at the very bottom she came upon a deck of playing cards wrapped in a square of old, old silk. She unwrapped them and laid them out on the bench one by one, choosing places for them as surely and delicately as a cat chooses where to set its paws. When she had formed a cross she sat still for a moment, holding the remaining cards in her left hand. Then her grandfather stirred and she gathered the cards quickly and without a sound. They were back in their silk before he was fully awake again, and Justine was sitting motionless on the bench with her hands folded neatly over her straw bag.