



Back  
When We Were  
Grownups

a novel by

Anne Tyler

ROLLING MEADOWS LIBRARY  
3110 MARTIN LANE  
ROLLING MEADOWS, IL 60008



Alfred A. Knopf New York

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK  
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

Copyright © 2001 by Anne Tyler

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. Distributed by Random House, Inc., New York.

[www.aaknopf.com](http://www.aaknopf.com)

Knopf, Borzoi Books, and the colophon are registered  
trademarks of Random House, Inc.

ISBN: 0-375-41253-0

LCCN: 2001088107

Manufactured in the United States of America  
First Edition

Also by Anne Tyler

*If Morning Ever Comes*

*The Tin Can Tree*

*A Slipping-Down Life*

*The Clock Winder*

*Celestial Navigation*

*Searching for Caleb*

*Earthly Possessions*

*Morgan's Passing*

*Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*

*The Accidental Tourist*

*Breathing Lessons*

*Saint Maybe*

*Ladder of Years*

*A Patchwork Planet*

# Back When We Were Grownups

Back When We Were Grownups





nce upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.

She was fifty-three years old by then—a grandmother. Wide and soft and dimpled, with two short wings of dry, fair hair flaring almost horizontally from a center part. Laugh lines at the corners of her eyes. A loose and colorful style of dress edging dangerously close to Bag Lady.

Give her credit: most people her age would say it was too late to make any changes. What's done is done, they would say. No use trying to alter things at this late date.

It did occur to Rebecca to say that. But she didn't.

. . .

On the day she made her discovery, she was picnicking on the North Fork River out in Baltimore County. It was a cool, sunny Sunday in early June of 1999, and her family had gathered to celebrate the engagement of Rebecca's youngest stepdaughter, NoNo Davitch.

The Davitches' cars circled the meadow like covered wagons



braced for attack. Their blankets dotted the grass, and their thermos jugs and ice chests and sports equipment crowded the picnic table. The children were playing beside the river in one noisy, tumbling group, but the adults kept themselves more separate. Alone or in twos they churned about rearranging their belongings, jockeying for spots in the sun, wandering off hither and yon in their moody Davitch manner. One of the stepdaughters was sitting by herself in her minivan. One of the sons-in-law was stretching his hamstrings over by the runners' path. The uncle was stabbing the ground repeatedly with his cane.

Goodness, what would Barry think? (Barry, the new fiancé.) He would think they disapproved of his marrying NoNo.

And he would be right.

Not that they ever behaved much differently under any conditions.

Barry had a blanket mostly to himself, because NoNo kept flitting elsewhere. The tiniest and prettiest of the Davitch girls—a little hummingbird of a person—she darted first to one sister and then another, ducking her shiny dark cap of hair and murmuring something urgent.

Murmuring, "Like him, please," maybe. Or, "At least make him feel welcome."

The first sister grew very busy rummaging through a straw hamper. The second shaded her eyes and pretended to look for the children.

Rebecca—who earned her living hosting parties, after all—felt she had no choice but to clap her hands and call, "Okay, folks!"

Languidly, they turned. She seized a baseball from the table and held it up. No, it was bigger than a baseball. A softball, then; undoubtedly the property of the son-in-law stretching his hamstrings, who taught phys ed at the local high school. It was all the same to Rebecca; she had never been the sporty type. Still: "Time for a game, everybody!" she called. "Barry? NoNo? Come on, now! We'll say this rock is home plate. Zeb, move that log over to where first base ought to be. The duffel bag can be second, and for third . . . Who's got something we can use for third?"

They groaned, but she refused to give up. “Come on, people! Show some life here! We need to exercise off all that food we’re about to eat!”

In slow motion they began to obey, rising from their blankets and drifting where she pointed. She turned toward the runners’ path and, “Yoo-hoo! Jeep!” she called. Jeep stopped hugging one beefy knee and squinted in her direction. “Haul yourself over here!” she ordered. “We’re organizing a softball game!”

“Aw, Beck,” he said, “I was hoping to get a run in.” But he came plodding toward her.

While Jeep set about correcting the placement of the bases, Rebecca went to deal with the stepdaughter in the minivan. Who happened to be Jeep’s wife, in fact. Rebecca hoped this wasn’t one of their silly quarrels. “Sweetie!” she sang out. She waded through the weeds, scooping up armfuls of her big red bandanna-print skirt. “Patch? Roll down your window, Patch. Can you hear me? Is something the matter?”

Patch turned and gazed out at her. You could tell she must be hot. Spikes of her chopped black hair were sticking to her forehead, and her sharp, freckled face was shining with sweat. Still, she made no move to open her window. Rebecca grabbed the door handle and yanked it—luckily, just before Patch thought to push the lock down.

“Now, then!” Rebecca caroled. “What’s all this about?”

Patch said, “Can’t a person ever get a moment of peace in this family?”

She was thirty-seven years old but looked more like fourteen, in her striped T-shirt and skinny jeans. And acted like fourteen, too, Rebecca couldn’t help thinking; but all she said was, “Come on out and join us! We’re starting up a softball game.”

“No, thanks.”

“Pretty please?”

“For Lord’s sake, Beck, don’t you know how I hate this?”

“Hate it!” Rebecca cried merrily, choosing to misunderstand. “But you’re wonderful at sports! The rest of us don’t even know where the bases go. Poor Jeep is having to do everything.”

Patch said, "I cannot for the life of me see why we should celebrate my little sister's engagement to a—to a—"

Words appeared to fail her. She clamped her arms tight across her flat chest and faced forward again.

"To a what?" Rebecca asked her. "A nice, decent, well-spoken man. A lawyer."

"A *corporate* lawyer. A man who brings his appointment book to a picnic; did you notice his appointment book? Him and his yacht-looking, country-club-looking clothes; his ridiculous yellow crew cut; his stupid rubber-soled boating shoes. And look at how he was sprung on us! Just sprung on us with no warning! One day it's, oh, poor NoNo, thirty-five years old and never even been kissed so far as anyone knew; and the next day—I swear, the very next day!—she pops up out of the blue and announces an August wedding."

"Well, now, I just have a feeling she may have kept him secret out of nervousness," Rebecca said. "She didn't want to look foolish, in case the courtship came to nothing. Also, maybe she worried you girls would be too critical."

Not without reason, she didn't add.

Patch said, "Hogwash. You know why she kept him secret: he's been married once before. Married and divorced, with a twelve-year-old son to boot."

"Well, these things do happen," Rebecca said drily.

"And such a pathetic son, too. Did you see?" Patch jabbed a thumb toward the children by the river, but Rebecca didn't bother turning. "A puny little runt of a son! And it can't have escaped your notice that Barry has sole custody. He's had to cook for that child and clean house, drive the car pool, help with homework . . . Of course he wants a wife! Unpaid nanny, is more like it."

"Now, dearie, that's an insult to NoNo," Rebecca said. "Any man in his right mind would want NoNo for her own sake."

Patch merely gave an explosive wheeze that lifted the spikes of hair off her forehead.

"Just think," Rebecca reminded her. "Didn't *I* marry a divorced man with three little girls? And see, it worked out fine! I'd be married to him still, if he had lived."

All Patch said to this was, "And how you could throw a party for them!"

"Well, of course I'd throw a party. It's an occasion!" Rebecca said. "Besides: you and Biddy asked for one, if I remember correctly."

"We asked if you planned to give one, is all, since you're so fond of engagement parties. Why, Min Foo's had three of them! They seem to be kind of a habit with you."

Rebecca opened her mouth to argue, because she was almost positive that Patch and Biddy had requested, in so many words, that she put together a picnic. But then she saw that she might have misinterpreted. Maybe they had just meant that since they knew she would be planning something, they would prefer it to be held outside. (Oh, the Davitch girls were very unsocial. "I guess you're going to insist on some kind of shindig," one of them would sigh, and then they would show up and sit around looking bored, picking at their food while Rebecca tried to jolly things along.)

Well, no matter, because Patch was finally unfolding herself from the minivan. She slammed the door behind her and said, "Let's get started, then, if you're so set on this."

"Thank you, sweetie," Rebecca said. "I just know we'll have a good time today."

Patch said, "Ha!" and marched off toward the others, leaving Rebecca to trail behind.

The softball game had begun now, at least in a halfhearted way. People were scattered across the meadow seemingly at random, with Rebecca's brother-in-law and Barry so far off in the outfield that they might not even be playing. The catcher (Biddy) was tying her shoe. The uncle leaned on his cane at an indeterminate spot near third base. Rebecca's daughter was sunbathing on first, lounging in the grass with her face tipped back and her eyes closed.

As Patch and then Rebecca came up behind home plate, Jeep was assuming the batter's stance, his barrel-shaped body set sideways to them and his bat wagging cockily. NoNo, on the pitcher's mound, crooked her arm at an awkward angle above her shoulder and released the ball. It traveled in an uncertain arc until Jeep lost

patience and took a stride forward and hit a low drive past second. Hakim, Rebecca's son-in-law, watched with interest as it whizzed by. (No surprise there, since Hakim hailed from someplace Arab and had probably never seen a softball in his life.) Jeep dropped his bat and trotted to first, not disturbing Min Foo's sunbath in the least. He rounded second, receiving a beatific smile from Hakim, and headed for third. Third was manned by Biddy's . . . oh, Rebecca never knew what to call him . . . longtime companion, dear Troy, who always claimed it was while he was fumbling a pop-up fly at age five that he first realized he was gay. All he did was wave amiably as Jeep went trundling past.

By that time, Barry had managed to locate the ball. He threw it toward Biddy, but she was tying her other shoe now. It was Patch who stepped forward to intercept it, apparently without effort. Then she turned back to home plate and tagged her husband out.

Patch and Jeep might have been playing alone, for all the reaction they got. Biddy straightened up from her shoe and yawned. NoNo started clucking over a broken fingernail. Min Foo was probably unaware of what had happened, even—unless she'd been able to figure it out with her eyes closed.

"Oh," Rebecca cried, "you-all are not even trying! Where is your team spirit?"

"For that, we need more than one side," Jeep said, wiping his forehead on his shoulder. "There aren't enough of us playing."

To Rebecca, it seemed just then that there were far too many of them. Such a large and unwieldy group, they were; so cumbersome, so much work. But she said, "You're absolutely right," and turned in the direction of the river. "Kids!" she called. "Hey, kids!"

The children were hopping in an uneven line a good twenty yards away, beyond a stretch of buzzing, humming grass and alongside flowing water; so at first they didn't hear her. She had to haul up her skirt again and slog toward them, calling, "Come on, everybody! Come and play ball! You kids against us grownups!"

Now they stopped what they were doing (some version of Follow the Leader, it seemed, leaping from rock to rock) and looked over at her. Five of the six were here today—all but Dixon, the oldest,

who'd gone someplace else with his girlfriend. And then there was Barry's son, what's-his-name. Peter. "Peter?" Rebecca called. "Want to play softball?"

He stood slightly apart from the others, noticeably pale-haired and white-skinned and scrawny in this company of dark, vivid Davitch children. Rebecca felt a tug of sympathy for him. She called, "You can be pitcher, if you like!"

He took a step backward and shook his head. Well, no, of course: she should have offered him the outfield. Something inconspicuous. The others, meanwhile, had broken rank and were starting toward her. "Not It, not It," the youngest child was chanting, evidently confused as to what softball was all about. Patch and Jeep's three (wouldn't you know) were vying to be first at bat. "We'll draw straws," Rebecca told them. "Come on, everybody! Winning team gets excused from cleanup after lunch."

Only Peter stayed where he was. He was balanced on a low rock, alert and motionless, giving off a chilling silence. Rebecca called, "Sweetie? Aren't you coming?"

Again he shook his head. The other children veered around her and plowed on toward the playing field, but Rebecca gathered her skirt higher and pressed forward. Long, cool grasses tickled her bare calves. A cloud of startled white butterflies fluttered around her knees. She reached the first rock, took a giant step up, and leapt to the next rock just beyond, teetering for a second before she found her footing on the slick, mossy surface. (She was wearing rope-soled espadrilles that gave her almost no traction.) So far she was still on dry land, but most of the other rocks—Peter's included—turned out to be partly submerged. This meant that the children had been disobeying instructions. They'd been warned to stay away from the river, which was unpredictably deep in some spots and wider than a two-lane highway, not to mention icy cold so early in the season.

Peter kept as still as a cornered deer; Rebecca sensed that even though she wasn't looking at him. For the moment, she was looking at the scenery. Oh, didn't a river rest your eyes! She sank into a peaceful trance, watching how the water seemed to gather itself as it traveled toward a sharp bend. It swelled up in loose, silky tangles

and then it smoothed and flowed on, transparent at the edges but nearly opaque at the center, as yellow-green and sunlit as a bottle in a window. She drifted with it, dreaming. It could have been a hundred years ago. The line of dark trees on the opposite shore would have looked the same; she'd have heard the same soft, curly lapping close by, the same rushing sound farther off.

Well. Enough of this. She tore her gaze away and turned again to Peter. "I've got you now!" she told him gaily.

He took another step backward and disappeared.

For a moment, she couldn't believe what had happened. She just stood there with her mouth open. Then she looked down and saw a turmoil in the water. A small, white, big-eyed face gulping air and choking. A frantic snarl of thin, bare, flailing arms.

She jumped onto the rock he'd been standing on, skidding slightly and bruising an ankle. She plunged in waist deep and gasped. (The water was so cold it burned.) First she grabbed Peter's wrist but lost it. Then she clutched blue denim. She hitched him up by the seat of his jeans and found the time, somehow, to consider how absurd this must look: a middle-aged woman plucking a boy from a river like a sack of laundry, hoisting him aloft for one split second before her muscles registered his weight and they both went under. But she still had hold of him. She kept her grip. She fought to thrust him above the surface even while she was half sitting on the bottom. Then she was up and struggling shoreward, stumbling and falling and rising and staggering on, hauling him by his armpits. (A good thing he was so undersized or she never could have managed, adrenaline or no.) Between his coughs now he was drawing huge, rough, scraping breaths, and once or twice he gagged. She dragged him in a bobbling way across the rocks to the grass, where she dropped him. She bent double to clear her head and noticed, in that position, how her skirt was streaming with water; so she collected a handful of hem and wrung it out.

The first to reach them was Barry. He pounded up shouting, "Peter! Peter? What in hell were you *doing*?" Peter didn't answer. He was shaking and chattering, huddling into himself on the ground. Barry peeled his own windbreaker off and bundled it around him.

Meanwhile Zeb arrived—Rebecca’s brother-in-law. He was followed by the children and then by the rest of the grownups, who slowed to a casual saunter once they saw that things were under control.

Zeb was a pediatrician; so Barry and Rebecca gave way to him. He squatted and asked, “Are you okay?” and Peter nodded, swiping at his nose with a sleeve of his father’s windbreaker. “He’s okay,” Zeb announced.

Well, a layman could have done that much. “Check his lungs,” Rebecca ordered.

“His lungs are fine,” Zeb said, but he went on watching Peter. “How did it happen, son?” he asked.

Rebecca tensed, dreading the answer, but Peter kept silent. You couldn’t tell a thing from his expression: eyes lowered, mouth pursed in a stubborn little bunch. Even before his dunking, he had had the skinned appearance of a wet cat, and now she could make out the pink of his scalp beneath his colorless hair. Periodically he swiped at his nose again in a fractious way, as if a gnat were pestering him.

“Well,” Zeb said finally, and he sighed and rose to his feet. He was a gangling, bespectacled, kind-faced man, so accustomed to dealing with the children of the inner-city poor that he wore a permanent look of resignation. “Let’s rustle up some dry clothes for these two,” he said. “Come on, everybody. Fun’s over.”

As they were heading back toward the picnic—Rebecca hugging her rib cage and doing her best to stop her shivers—Barry came up beside her. “I don’t know how I can ever thank you, Mrs., er, Beck,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, “goodness! I’m sure he would have grabbed on to a branch or something, eventually.”

“Well, still: I appreciate your coming to the rescue.”

For now he did, she thought. But wait till he found out that Peter never would have fallen in if not for her.

. . .

They didn’t continue the ball game. There was talk of going home early, even; and for once, Rebecca let them argue without



intervening. She sat quietly at the picnic table, cocooned in a leaf-littered blanket, while they hashed it out among themselves. Look at how blue Peter's lips were, several of the women said. He would catch his death of cold! But of course, the grandchildren wanted to stay, and the uncle—an energy miser—pointed out the waste of gas if they had driven all this way only to turn around and drive back. “Let's just eat, for mercy's sake,” he said. Biddy, who had gone to a lot of trouble over the food, jumped up as if that settled things and started unpacking coolers.

By this time, Rebecca's hair had dried into its usual pup-tent shape and her blouse had changed from an icy film to a warm, damp second skin beneath her blanket. She repositioned the blanket around her waist and accepted the loan of Zeb's cardigan. Peter fared better: from the back seats and floors of various vehicles, an entire outfit was assembled. Emmy donated a sweatshirt, Danny a pair of striped baseball knickers, and Jeep two semi-white gym socks. Ignoring the curious stares of the other children, Peter stripped then and there, exposing tweaky pale dots of nipples and dingy, stretched-out underpants fraying at the edges. (This was what happened, Rebecca reflected, when a father had sole custody.) Everything was too big for him. Even Danny's knickers—and Danny was barely thirteen—hung off him in folds, clinging to him only where the wet underpants had soaked through.

It struck Rebecca as unusual that a boy that old didn't mind changing clothes in public. And there was something needful and nudging about the way he stayed so close to his father. Once they were settled on NoNo's blanket, he kept interrupting the conversation by plucking Barry's sleeve and whispering at length in his ear, as if he were not just small for his age but young for his age, too.

“Is that child all *right*?” she asked Zeb.

“Oh, sure. Just bashful, I suspect,” he told her.

But a big part of Zeb's profession was soothing parents' anxieties; so she turned to Biddy. “I haven't heard him say a word to NoNo,” she said. “I hope there isn't going to be some kind of step-mother problem.”