



BookBrowse

A Spool of Blue Thread

by Anne Tyler

Excerpt

A Spool of Blue Thread

Late one July evening in 1994, Red and Abby Whitshank had a phone call from their son Denny. They were getting ready for bed at the time. Abby was standing at the bureau in her slip, drawing hairpins one by one from her scattery sand-colored topknot. Red, a dark, gaunt man in striped pajama bottoms and a white T shirt, had just sat down on the edge of the bed to take his socks off; so when the phone rang on the nightstand beside him, he was the one who answered. "Whitshank residence," he said.

And then, "Well, hey there."

Abby turned from the mirror, both arms still raised to her head.

"What's that," he said, without a question mark.

"Huh?" he said. "Oh, what the hell, Denny!"

Abby dropped her arms.

"Hello?" he said. "Wait. Hello? Hello?"

He was silent for a moment, and then he replaced the receiver.

"What?" Abby asked him.

"Says he's gay."

"What?"

"Said he needed to tell me something: he's gay."

"And you hung up on him!"

"No, Abby. He hung up on me. All I said was 'What the hell,' and he hung up on me. Click! Just like that."

"Oh, Red, how could you?" Abby wailed. She spun away to reach for her bathrobe—a no-color chenille that had once been pink. She wrapped it around her and tied the sash tightly. "What possessed you to say that?" she asked him.

"I didn't mean anything by it! Somebody springs something on you, you're going to say 'What the

hell,' right?"

Abby grabbed a handful of the hair that pouffed over her forehead.

"All I meant was," Red said, "'What the hell next, Denny? What are you going to think up next to worry us with?' And he knew I meant that. Believe me, he knew. But now he can make this all my fault, my narrow-mindedness or fuddy-duddiness or whatever he wants to call it. He was glad I said that to him. You could tell by how fast he hung up on me; he'd been just hoping all along that I would say the wrong thing."

"All right," Abby said, turning practical. "Where was he calling from?"

"How would I know where he was calling from? He doesn't have a fixed address, hasn't been in touch all summer, already changed jobs twice that we know of and probably more that we don't know of . . . A nineteen-year-old boy and we have no idea what part of the planet he's on! You've got to wonder what's wrong, there."

"Did it sound like it was long distance? Could you hear that kind of rushing sound? Think. Could he have been right here in Baltimore?"

"I don't know, Abby."

She sat down next to him. The mattress slanted in her direction; she was a wide, solid woman. "We have to find him," she said. Then, "We should have that whatsit—caller ID." She leaned forward and gazed fiercely at the phone. "Oh, God, I want caller ID this instant!"

"What for? So you could phone him back and he could just let it ring?"

"He wouldn't do that. He would know it was me. He would answer, if he knew it was me."

She jumped up from the bed and started pacing back and forth, up and down the Persian runner that was worn nearly white in the middle from all the times she had paced it before. This was an attractive room, spacious and well designed, but it had the comfortably shabby air of a place whose inhabitants had long ago stopped seeing it.

"What did his voice sound like?" she asked. "Was he nervous? Was he upset?"

"He was fine."

"So you say. Had he been drinking, do you think?"

"I couldn't tell."

"Were other people with him?"

"I couldn't tell, Abby."

"Or maybe . . . one other person?"

He sent her a sharp look. "You are not thinking he was serious," he said.

"Of course he was serious! Why else would he say it?"

"The boy isn't gay, Abby."

"How do you know that?"

"He just isn't. Mark my words. You're going to feel silly, by and by, like, 'Shoot, I overreacted.'?"

"Well, naturally that is what you would want to believe."

"Doesn't your female intuition tell you anything at all? This is a kid who got a girl in trouble before he was out of high school!"

"So? That doesn't mean a thing. It might even have been a symptom."

"Come again?"

"We can never know with absolute certainty what another person's sex life is like."

"No, thank God," Red said.

He bent over, with a grunt, and reached beneath the bed for his slippers. Abby, meanwhile, had stopped pacing and was staring once more at the phone. She set a hand on the receiver. She hesitated. Then she snatched up the receiver and pressed it to her ear for half a second before slamming it back down.

"The thing about caller ID is," Red said, more or less to himself, "it seems a little like cheating. A person should be willing to take his chances, answering the phone. That's kind of the general idea with phones, is my opinion." He heaved himself to his feet and started toward the bathroom. Behind him, Abby said, "This would explain so much! Wouldn't it? If he should turn out to be gay."

Red was closing the bathroom door by then, but he poked his head back out to glare at her. His fine black eyebrows, normally straight as rulers, were knotted almost together. "Sometimes," he said, "I rue and deplore the day I married a social worker."

Then he shut the door very firmly.

When he returned, Abby was sitting upright in bed with her arms clamped across the lace bosom of her nightgown. "You are surely not going to try and blame Denny's problems on my profession," she told him.

"I'm just saying a person can be too understanding," he said. "Too sympathizing and pitying, like. Getting into a kid's private brain."

"There is no such thing as 'too understanding.'?"

"Well, count on a social worker to think that."

She gave an exasperated puff of a breath, and then she sent another glance toward the phone. It was on Red's side of the bed, not hers. Red raised the covers and got in, blocking her view. He reached over and snapped off the lamp on the nightstand. The room fell into darkness, with just a faint glow

from the two tall, gauzy windows overlooking the front lawn.

Red was lying flat now, but Abby went on sitting up. She said, "Do you think he'll call us back?"

"Oh, yes. Sooner or later."

"It took all his courage to call the first time," she said. "Maybe he used up every bit he had."

"Courage! What courage? We're his parents! Why would he need courage to call his own parents?"

"It's you he needs it for," Abby said.

"That's ridiculous. I've never raised a hand to him."

"No, but you disapprove of him. You're always finding fault with him. With the girls you're such a softie, and then Stem is more your kind of person. While Denny! Things come harder to Denny. Sometimes I think you don't like him."

"Abby, for God's sake. You know that's not true."

Oh, you love him, all right. But I've seen the way you look at him—'Who is this person?'—and don't you think for a moment that he hasn't seen it too."

"If that's the case," Red said, "how come it's you he's always trying to get away from?"

"He's not trying to get away from me!"

"From the time he was five or six years old, he wouldn't let you into his room. Kid preferred to change his own sheets rather than let you in to do it for him! Hardly ever brought his friends home, wouldn't say what their names were, wouldn't even tell you what he did in school all day. 'Get out of my life, Mom,' he was saying. 'Stop meddling, stop prying, stop breathing down my neck.' His least favorite picture book—the one he hated so much he tore out all the pages, remember?—had that baby rabbit that wants to change into a fish and a cloud and such so he can get away, and the mama rabbit keeps saying how she will change too and come after him. Denny ripped out every single everlasting page!"

"That had nothing to do with—"

"You wonder why he's turned gay? Not that he has turned gay, but if he had, if it's crossed his mind just to bug us with that, you want to know why? I'll tell you why: it's the mother. It is always the smothering mother."

"Oh!" Abby said. "That is just so outdated and benighted and so . . . wrong, I'm not even going to dignify it with an answer."

"You're certainly using a lot of words to tell me so."

"And how about the father, if you want to go back to the Dark Ages for your theories? How about the macho, construction-guy father who tells his son to buck up, show some spunk, quit whining about the small stuff, climb the darn roof and hammer the slates in?"

"You don't hammer slates in, Abby."

"How about him?" she asked.

"Okay, fine! I did that. I was the world's worst parent. It's done."

There was a moment of quiet. The only sound came from outside—the whisper of a car slipping past.

"I didn't say you were the worst," Abby said.

"Well," Red said.

Another moment of quiet.

Abby asked, "Isn't there a number you can punch that will dial the last person who called?"

"Star sixty-nine," Red said instantly. He cleared his throat. "But you are surely not going to do that."

"Why not?"

"Denny was the one who chose to end the conversation, might I point out."

"His feelings were hurt, was why," Abby said.

"If his feelings were hurt, he'd have taken his time hanging up. He wouldn't have been so quick to cut me off. But he hung up like he was just waiting to hang up. Oh, he was practically rubbing his hands together, giving me that news! He starts right in. 'I'd like to tell you something,' he says."

"Before, you said it was 'I need to tell you something.'?"

"Well, one or the other," Red said.

"Which was it?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters."

He thought a moment. Then he tried it out under his breath. "'I need to tell you something,'?" he tried. "'I'd like to tell you something.' 'Dad, I'd like to—'?" He broke off. "I honestly don't remember," he said.

"Could you dial star sixty-nine, please?"

"I can't figure out his reasoning. He knows I'm not anti-gay. I've got a gay guy in charge of our drywall, for Lord's sake. Denny knows that. I can't figure out why he thought this would bug me. I mean, of course I'm not going to be thrilled. You always want your kid to have it as easy in life as he can. But—"

"Hand me the phone," Abby said.

The phone rang.

Red grabbed the receiver at the very same instant that Abby flung herself across him to grab it herself. He had it first, but there was a little tussle and somehow she was the one who ended up with it. She sat up straight and said, "Denny?"

Then she said, "Oh. Jeannie."

Red lay flat again.

"No, no, we're not in bed yet," she said. There was a pause. "Certainly. What's wrong with yours?" Another pause. "It's no trouble at all. I'll see you at eight tomorrow. Bye."

She held the receiver toward Red, and he took it from her and reached over to replace it in its cradle.

"She wants to borrow my car," she told him. She sank back onto her side of the bed.

Then she said, in a thin, lonesome-sounding voice, "I guess star sixty-nine won't work now, will it."

"No," Red said, "I guess not."

"Oh, Red. Oh, what are we going to do? We'll never, ever hear from him again! He's not going to give us another chance!"

"Now, hon," he told her. "We'll hear from him. I promise." And he reached for her and drew her close, settling her head on his shoulder.

They lay like that for some time, until gradually Abby stopped fidgeting and her breaths grew slow and even. Red, though, went on staring up into the dark. At one point, he mouthed some words to himself in an experimental way. "I need to tell you something," he mouthed, not even quite whispering it. Then, "I'd like to tell you something." Then, "'Dad, I'd like to . . . 'Dad, I need to . . .'" He tossed his head impatiently on his pillow. He started over. "I tell you something: I'm gay." "I tell you something: I think I'm gay." "I'm gay." "I think I'm gay." "I think I may be gay." "I'm gay."

But eventually he grew silent, and at last he fell asleep too.

Well, of course they did hear from him again. The Whitshanks weren't a melodramatic family. Not even Denny was the type to disappear off the face of the earth, or sever all contact, or stop speaking—or not permanently, at least. It was true that he skipped the beach trip that summer, but he might have skipped it anyhow; he had to make his pocket money for the following school year. (He was attending St. Eskil College, in Pronghorn, Minnesota.) And he did telephone in September. He needed money for textbooks, he said. Unfortunately, Red was the only one home at the time, so it wasn't a very revealing conversation. "What did you talk about?" Abby demanded, and Red said, "I told him his textbooks had to come out of his earnings."

"I mean, did you talk about that last phone call? Did you apologize? Did you explain? Did you ask him any questions?"

"We didn't really get into it."

"Red!" Abby said. "This is classic! This is such a classic reaction: a young person announces he's gay and his family just carries on like before, pretending they didn't hear."

"Well, fine," Red said. "Call him back. Get in touch with his dorm."

Abby looked uncertain. "What reason should I give him for calling?" she asked.

"Say you want to grill him."

"I'll just wait till he phones again," she decided.

But when he phoned again—which he did a month or so later, when Abby was there to answer—it was to talk about his plane reservations for Christmas vacation. He wanted to change his arrival date, because first he was going to Hibbing to visit his girlfriend. His girlfriend! "What could I say?" Abby asked Red later. "I had to say, 'Okay, fine.'?"

"What could you say," Red agreed.

He didn't refer to the subject again, but Abby herself sort of simmered and percolated all those weeks before Christmas. You could tell she was just itching to get things out in the open. The rest of the family edged around her warily. They knew nothing about the gay announcement—Red and Abby had concurred on that much, not to tell them without Denny's say-so—but they could sense that something was up.

It was Abby's plan (though not Red's) to sit Denny down and have a nice heart-to-heart as soon as he got home. But on the morning of the day that his plane was due in, they had a letter from St. Eskil reminding them of the terms of their contract: the Whitshanks would be responsible for the next semester's tuition even though Denny had withdrawn.

"Withdrawn,?" Abby repeated. She was the one who had opened the letter, although both of them were reading it. The slow, considering way she spoke brought out all the word's ramifications. Denny had withdrawn; he was withdrawn; he had withdrawn from the family years ago. What other middle-class American teenager lived the way he did—flitting around the country like a vagrant, completely out of his parents' control, getting in touch just sporadically and neglecting whenever possible to give them any means of getting in touch with him? How had things come to such a pass? They certainly hadn't allowed the other children to behave this way. Red and Abby looked at each other for a long, despairing moment.

Understandably, therefore, the subject that dominated Christmas that year was Denny's leaving school. (He had decided school was a waste of money, was all he had to say, since he didn't have the least idea what he wanted to do in life. Maybe in a year or two, he said.) His gayness, or his non-gayness, just seemed to get lost in the shuffle.

"I can almost see now why some families pretend they weren't told," Abby said after the holidays.

"Mm-hmm," Red said, poker-faced.

Excerpted from *A Spool of Blue Thread* by Anne Tyler. Copyright 2015 by Anne Tyler. Excerpted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House LLC.