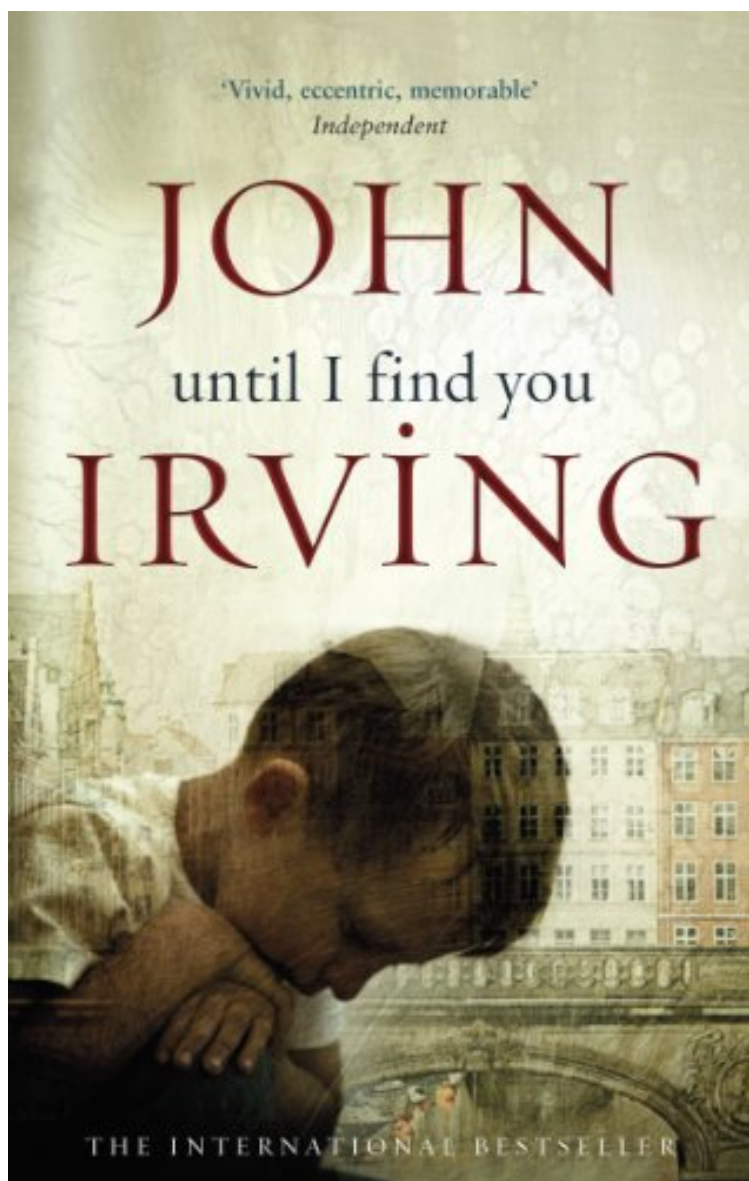


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# Until I Find You



*Par John Irving*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur'According to his mother, Jack Burns was an actor before he was an actor, but Jack's most vivid memories of childhood were those moments when he felt compelled to hold his mother's hand. He wasn't acting then.' Jack Burns' mother, Alice, is a tattoo artist in search of the boy's father, a virtuoso organist named William who has fled America to Europe. To fund her journey, she plies her trade in the seaports of the Baltic coast. But her four-year-old son's errant father can't be found, and soon even Jack's memories of that perplexing time are called into question. It is only when he becomes a Hollywood actor in later life that what he has experienced in the past comes into telling play in his present.....comAt over 800 pages, John Irving's Until I Find You is a daunting proposition at best. Anyone who finishes it will have

acquired forearm muscles, sore shoulders, and not much else. The story is self-indulgent, repetitive and, ultimately, boring, that cardinal sin that readers can't forgive. Longtime Irving readers have stayed with him through a few hits and a miss or two, but this is an all-time low. We are accustomed to Irving's work as quirky, bizarre, and off-the-wall and have forgiven all by calling such high-jinks and characters "imaginative" or "absolutely original." The only thing original about this tome is the descent into soft porn. Jack Burns, the hero of the tale, is four years old when it all begins. He is the illegitimate son of Daughter Alice, a tattoo artist and, guess what, daughter of a tattoo artist. She takes Jack on a pilgrimage to find his womanizing father, William, a church organist and "ink addict." By seeking out church organs and tattoo parlors, she expects to find him. She doesn't, and by now we have spent more than a hundred pages in Northern European cities doing an imitation of Groundhog Day. Same story, different day: a little prostitution for Alice, a few questions asked; alas, no daddy. Alice and Jack return to Toronto so that Jack may enter a previously all-girls school, which will admit little boys for the first time. There begins another 200 pages of the girls and the teachers abusing Jack, over and over again. By now, he is five and is, for some unfathomable reason, eminently interesting to girls and women. His "friend" Emma keeps careful track of "the little guy," as she calls Jack's penis, looking for signs of life. The worst part of all this is that none of it is funny or sad or even clever. There are wrestling vignettes, of course, and prep school tedium, but no bears. Maybe bears would have saved it. There were funny parts in *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules* as well as poignant, horrific parts in both of those and other Irving novels. This story is flat. The voice never changes; it just drones on. Jack becomes an actor. First, he is a boy in drag because he is so pretty, then he takes transvestite parts. He and Emma, now a published novelist, live together in LA, which provides endless opportunity for name-dropping. His career eventually takes off and he gets recognition and awards, but still no daddy. Irving, it turns out, never knew his father, either. Perhaps this exercise will exorcise that demon once and for all and Irving's next book will be about something more compelling than a little boy's penis and his trashy mother's antics. If you do make it through to the book's snapper of an ending, you deserve to find out what it is on your own. Call it a reward. --Valerie Ryan

Chapter 1 In the Care of Churchgoers and Old Girls

According to his mother, Jack Burns was an actor before he was an actor, but Jack's most vivid memories of childhood were those moments when he felt compelled to hold his mother's hand. He wasn't acting then. Of course we don't remember much until we're four or five years old and what we remember at that early age is very selective or incomplete, or even false. What Jack recalled as the first time he felt the need to reach for his mother's hand was probably the hundredth or two hundredth time. Preschool tests revealed that Jack Burns had a vocabulary beyond his years, which is not uncommon among only children accustomed to adult conversation especially only children of single parents. But of greater significance, according to the tests, was Jack's capacity for consecutive memory, which, when he was three, was comparable to that of a nine-year-old. At four, his retention of detail and understanding of linear time were equal to an eleven-year-old's. (The details included, but were not limited to, such trivia as articles of clothing and the names of streets.) These test results were bewildering to Jack's mother, Alice, who considered him to be an inattentive child; in her view, Jack's propensity for daydreaming made him immature for his age. Nevertheless, in the fall of 1969, when Jack was four and had not yet started kindergarten, his mother walked with him to the corner of Pickthall and Hutchings Hill Road in Forest Hill, which was a nice neighborhood in Toronto. They were waiting for school to be let out, Alice explained, so that Jack could see the girls. St. Hilda's was then called a church school for girls, from kindergarten through grade thirteen at that time still in existence, in Canada and Jack's mother had decided that this was where Jack would begin his schooling, although he was a boy. She waited to tell him of her decision until the main doors of the school opened, as if to greet them, and the girls streamed through in varying degrees of sullenness and exultation and prettiness and slouching disarray. Next year, Alice announced, St. Hilda's is going to admit boys. Only a very few boys, and only up to grade four. Jack couldn't move; he could barely breathe. Girls were passing him on all sides, some of them big and noisy, all of them in uniforms in those colors Jack Burns later came to believe he would wear to his grave: gray and maroon. The girls wore gray sweaters or maroon blazers over their white middie blouses. They're going to admit you, Jack's mother told him. I'm arranging it. How? he asked. I'm still figuring that out, Alice replied. The girls wore gray pleated skirts with gray kneesocks, which Canadians called knee-highs. It was Jack's first look at all those bare legs. He didn't yet understand how the girls were driven by some interior unrest to push their socks down to their ankles, or at least below their calves despite the school rule that knee-highs should be worn knee-high. Jack Burns further observed that the girls didn't see him standing there, or they looked right through him. But there was one older girl with

womanly hips and breasts, and lips as full as Alices. She locked onto Jacks eyes, as if she were powerless to avert her gaze. At the age of four, Jack wasnt sure if he was the one who couldnt look away from her, or if she was the one who was trapped and couldnt look away from him. Whichever the case, her expression was so knowing that she frightened him. Perhaps she had seen what Jack would look like as an older boy, or a grown man, and what she saw in him riveted her with longing and desperation. (Or with fear and degradation, Jack Burns would one day conclude, because this same older girl suddenly looked away.) Jack and his mom went on standing in the sea of girls, until the girls rides had come and gone, and those on foot had left not even the sound of their shoes behind, or their intimidating but stimulating laughter. However, there was still enough warmth in the early-fall air to hold their scent, which Jack reluctantly inhaled and confused with perfume. With most of the girls at St. Hildas, it was not their perfume that lingered in the air; it was the smell of the girls themselves, which Jack Burns would never grow used to or take for granted. Not even by the time he left grade four. But why am I going to school here? Jack asked his mother, when the girls had gone. Some fallen leaves were all that remained in motion on the quiet street corner. Because its a good school, Alice answered. And youll be safe with the girls, she added. Jack must not have thought so, because he instantly reached for his moms hand. In that fall of the year before Jacks admission to St. Hildas, his mother was full of surprises. After showing him the uniformed girls, who would soon dominate his life, Alice announced that she would work her way through northern Europe in search of Jacks runaway dad. She knew the North Sea cities where he was most likely to be hiding from them; together they would hunt him down and confront him with his abandoned responsibilities. Jack Burns had often heard his mother refer to the two of them as his fathers abandoned responsibilities. But even at the age of four, Jack had come to the conclusion that his dad had left them for good in Jacks case, before he was born. And when his mom said she would work her way through these foreign cities, Jack knew what her work was. Like her dad, Alice was a tattoo artist; tattooing was the only work she knew. In the North Sea cities on their itinerary, other tattooists would give Alice work. They knew shed been apprenticed to her father, a well-known tattooer in Edinburgh officially, in the Port of Leith where Jacks mom had suffered the misfortune of meeting his dad. It was there he got her pregnant, and subsequently left her. In Alices account, Jacks father sailed on the New Scotland, which docked in Halifax. When he was gainfully employed, he would send for her or so he had promised. But Alice said she never heard from him only of him. Before moving on from Halifax, Jacks dad had cut quite a swath. Born Callum Burns, Jacks father changed his first name to William when he was still in university. His father was named Alasdair, which William said was Scots enough for the whole family. In Edinburgh, at the time of his scandalous departure for Nova Scotia, William Burns had been an associate of the Royal College of Organists, which meant that he had a diploma in organ-playing in addition to his bachelors in music. When he met Jacks mother, William was the organist at South Leith Parish Church; Alice was a choirgirl there. For an Edinburgh boy with upper-class pretensions and a good education William Burns had gone to Heriots before studying music at the University of Edinburgh a first job playing the organ in lower-class Leith might have struck him as slumming. But Jacks dad liked to joke that the Church of Scotland paid better than the Scottish Episcopal Church. While William was an Episcopalian, he liked it just fine at the South Leith Parish, where it was said that eleven thousand souls were buried in the graveyard, although there were not more than three hundred gravestones. Gravestones for the poor were not permitted. But at night, Jacks mom told him, people brought the ashes of loved ones and scattered them through the fence of the graveyard. The thought of so many souls blowing around in the dark gave the boy nightmares, but that church if only because of its graveyard was a popular place, and Alice believed she had died and gone to Heaven when she started singing for William there. In South Leith Parish Church, the choir and the organ were behind the congregation. There were not more than twenty seats for the choir the women in front, the men in back. For the duration of the sermon, William made a point of asking Alice to lean forward in the front row, so that he could see all of her. She wore a blue robe blue-jay blue, she told Jack and a white collar. Jacks mom fell in love with his dad that April of 1964, when he first came to play the organ. We were singing the hymns of the Resurrection, was how Alice put it, and there were crocuses and daffodils in the graveyard. (Doubtless all those ashes that were secretly scattered there benefited the flowers.) Alice took the young organist, who was also her choirmaster, to meet her father. Her dads tattoo parlor was called Persevere, which is the motto of the Port of Leith. It was Williams first look at a tattoo shop, which was on either Mandelson Street or Jane Street. In those days, Jacks mom explained, there was a rail bridge across Leith Walk, joining Mandelson to Jane, but Jack could never remember on which street she said the tattoo parlor was. He just knew that they lived there, in the shop, under the rumble of the trains. His mother called

this sleeping in the needles a phrase from between the wars. Sleeping in the needles meant that, when times were tough, you slept in the tattoo parlor you had nowhere else to live. But it was also what was said, on occasion, when a tattoo artist died as Alices father had in the shop. Thus, by both definitions of the phrase, her dad had always slept in the needles. Alices mother had died in childbirth, and her father whom Jack never met had raised her in the tattoo world. In Jacks eyes, his mom was unique among tattoo artists because shed never been tattooed. Her dad had told her that she shouldnt get a tattoo until she was old enough to understand a few essential things about herself; he must have meant those things that would never change. Like when Im in my sixties or seventies, Jacks mom used to say to him, when she was still in her twenties. You should get your first tattoo after Im dead, she told him, which was her way of saying that he shouldnt even think about getting tattooed. Alices dad took an instant dislike to William Burns, who got his first tattoo the day the two men met. The tattoo gripped his right thigh, where William could read it when he was sitting on the toilet the opening notes to an Easter hymn hed been rehearsing with Alice, the words to which began, Christ the Lord is risen today. Without the words, youd have to read music, and be sitting very close to Jacks father perhaps on an adjacent toilet to recognize the hymn. But then and there, upon giving the talented young organist his first tattoo, Alices dad told her that William would surely become an ink addict, a collector meaning he was one of those guys who would never stop with the first tattoo, or with the first twenty tattoos. He would go on getting tattooed, until his body was a sheet of music and every inch of his skin was covered by a note a dire prediction but one that failed to warn Alice away. The tattoo-crazy organist had already stolen her heart. But Jack Burns had heard most of this story by the time he was four. What came as a surprise, when his mother announced their upcoming European trip, was what she told him next: If we dont find your father by this time next year, when youll be starting school, well forget all about him and get on with our lives. Why this was such a shock was that, from Jacks earliest awareness that his father was missing worse, that he had absconded Jack and his mother had done a fair amount of looking for William Burns, and Jack had assumed they always would. The idea that they could forget all about him was more foreign to the boy than the proposed journey to northern Europe; nor had Jack known that, in his moms opinion, his starting school was of such importance. Shed not finished school herself. Alice had long felt inferior to Williams university education. Williams parents were both elementary-school teachers who gave private piano lessons to children on the side, but they had a high regard for artistic tutelage of a more professional kind. In their estimation, it was beneath their son to play the organ at South Leith Parish Church and not only because of the class friction that existed in those days between Edinburgh and Leith. (There were differences between the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church of Scotland, too.) Alices father was not a churchgoer of any kind. Hed sent Alice to church and choir practice to give her a life outside the tattoo parlor, never imagining that she would meet her ruin in the church and at choir practice or that she would bring her unscrupulous seducer to the shop to be tattooed! It was Williams parents who insisted that, although he was the principal organist for the South Leith Parish, he accept an offer to be the assistant organist at Old St. Pauls. What mattered to them was that Old St. Pauls was Scottish Episcopal and it was in Edinburgh, not in Leith. What captivated William was the organ. Hed started piano lessons at six and had not touched an organ before he was nine, but at seven or eight he began to stick bits of paper above the piano keys imagining they were organ stops. Hed already begun to dream about playing the organ, and the organ he dreamed about was the Father Willis at Old St. Pauls. If, in his parents opinion, to be the assistant organist at Old St. Pauls was more prestigious than being the principal organist at South Leith Parish Church, William just wanted to get his hands on the Father Willis. In Old St. Pauls, Jacks mother told him, the acoustics were a contributing factor to the organs fame. The boy would later wonder if she meant that almost any organ would have sounded good there, because of the reverberation time that is, the time it takes for a sound to diminish by sixty decibels being better than the organ. Alice remembered attending what she called an organ marathon at Old St. Pauls. Such an event must have been for fund-raising purposes a twenty-four-hour organ concert, with a different organist performing every hour or half hour. Who played when was, of course, a hierarchical arrangement; the best musicians performed when they were most likely to be heard, the others at the more unsociable hours. Young William Burns got to play before midnight if only a half hour before.