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Anna Snoekstra

ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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Anna Snoekstra was born in Canberra, Australia in 1988. She studied Creative Writing and Cinema at Melbourne University, followed by Screenwriting at RMIT University. She currently lives in Melbourne with her husband and tabby cat.

For my sister.

Prologue

By the time the first wisps of smoke rose into the night, the arsonist had made their escape. The streets were empty. A dull orange glow emanated from the courthouse, not yet bright enough to challenge the moon or the neon beer signs of the tavern across the road.

The smoke thickened quickly. Angry, dense clouds were rising in rolls, and yet when a car drove past, its only response was to speed up.

Soon, orange flames grew from the roof, replacing the smoke. The fire was so dazzling now that a contracted pupil could no longer distinguish between the dark gray and the black of the sky. People emerged in time to witness the windows exploding, one after another in a series of dry pops. The fire extended its arms out of each window, waving crazily at the gathering crowd.

Sirens began, but no one could hear them. The sound of the fire overtook everything, its low, light roar like the warning sound made at the back of a cat's throat. Two girls appeared from the tavern, late to the party. One ran toward the flames,

asking if anyone was inside, if anyone had seen anything. The other stood still, shoulders fixed, her hand over her mouth.

When the firemen pulled up, the bright street looked like daytime. The crowd had stepped back, the ones who had been closest damp with sweat. Everyone's eyes were wet. Perhaps from the ashes in the air, or perhaps because by now the news had circulated.

Yes, there was someone inside.

PART 1

’Tis a lesson you should heed:
Try, try, try again.
If at first you don’t succeed,
Try, try, try again.

—Proverb

1

Laura hurried to keep up with Scott and Sophie, her schoolbag thumping against her back.

"Wait for me!" she yelled, but they never did.

She had hesitated at the memorial outside the burned-out courthouse. A big picture of Ben was surrounded by lots of flowers and toys. The flowers were all brown and dried up, but there was a little plush cat that would have fit perfectly in the palm of her hand. Ben didn't need it; he was dead. But when she'd gone to take it, she'd looked up at the photo of him. His accusing brown eyes looked straight into hers. So she'd left the toy there, and the twins hadn't waited and she'd had to run as fast as she could to make sure they didn't leave her behind.

The sun bounced off the twins' blond hair, making Laura squint. They were sword fighting with sticks now. Galloping and fencing up the street, screaming "En garde!" at regular intervals. They wore the same white-and-green school uniform as Laura, except her shirt was no longer quite white. It was a pale alabaster from being washed a few hundred times

at least. It had belonged to Sophie once, and to their older sister, Rose, before her, as had her shorts.

Despite her every possession being a hand-me-down, Laura was unique. She knew that she was the cutest child in her kindergarten class. Her fringe was cut blunt, accentuating her large dark-lashed eyes. Her nose was a button, her mouth a little pink tulip. She lived for coos and pats on the head.

"Hurry up, Laura!" Scott yelled.

"My legs aren't as big as yours!" she yelled back, her little black school shoes clip-clopping on the pavement as she hurried.

Then she saw it.

A bee.

She slid to a halt. It was the shape of a jelly bean, with mean-looking yellow and black stripes. The bee buzzed in front of her, blocking her path as it hovered near a bush of pungent purple flowers. Laura was overwhelmed by the urge to see what it felt like. Squishy, she was fairly sure. She wanted to pinch it between her thumb and forefinger to see if it would pop. Laura had never been stung by a bee but Casey at school had once and he had cried in front of everyone. It must hurt a lot.

Very slowly, she inched around it, walking like a crab on the very edge of the pavement until there were a good two meters between the bee and her.

When she turned, the street was empty. Sophie and Scott had turned one of the corners, out of Laura's sight. If she really thought about it, she would probably know which one, but she couldn't think. The suburban street seemed to be growing bigger and bigger and Laura felt like she was shrinking smaller and smaller. A sob rose slowly and heavily in her throat. She wanted to cry out for her mum.

"En garde!"

Laura heard it loud and clear from her left. She ran, as fast as she could toward the sound.

Sophie and Scott changed into T-shirts then continued their sword fight in the backyard. Laura wasn't invited. They didn't like to play "baby games," even though Laura told them that now she was at school she was officially not a baby. She sat up at the kitchen bench, listening to the screams and laughter from outside and staring down at the three plates of crackers that Rose had left for their afternoon tea.

Laura could hear Scott yell so loud it came through the glass. "You're dead!"

She watched as Sophie feigned a dramatic and violent death. It was a stupid game; she wouldn't have wanted to play anyway. While they were distracted, Laura quickly reached over, took two crackers from each of their plates and stuffed them in her mouth.

She chewed happily, swinging her legs and kicking the bench. The house filled with the banging sound. She knew she was being naughty. If her mum was at home she'd be in big trouble. But she kept kicking, trying to leave some little brown scuffs to blame on either Sophie or Scott. She hadn't decided yet.

Rose's bedroom door opened and Laura stopped kicking. Her older sister stamped down the corridor. Some days Rose would want to braid Laura's hair, or put makeup on her and tell her how pretty she was. *Just like a little doll*, she would say. Laura hoped it was one of those days but the angry stomps of Rose's feet told her it wasn't.

"How was school?" Rose pulled open the fridge door and put her head inside, as if she was trying to absorb all the cold.

"It was good. Nina said she could climb the big tree but she couldn't and she fell out and broke her bum."

Rose stuck her head out and looked at Laura, a can of Coke in her hand. Her lips were tugging up as if she was going to laugh.

"Really?"

"Yep!" Laura began to giggle, and then Rose laughed too. Laura liked it when she made Rose laugh. Rose was the prettiest girl Laura knew, even when she frowned, which was most of the time. When she laughed she looked like a princess.

"Poor kid," Rose said. She stopped laughing and rested the Coke against her forehead.

Laura didn't say anything. Nina hadn't really fallen out of the tree. Actually, she had made it the whole way to the top and then bragged about it all afternoon.

"What was that banging noise before?"

"Dunno. Can we braid my hair, Posey?"

"You know I don't like it when you call me that."

"Sowwy," she said. Sometimes when she pretended to still be a baby, Rose would like her more, but this time Rose didn't even look at her. Instead, Rose cracked open the can and took a swig. Laura looked at the pictures on Rose's arm. They went all the way from her elbow to her shoulder and looked like pen, but were there forever. Laura thought they were beautiful. Rose looked up at the clock and groaned.

"I'm going to be late. Fuck." Rose slammed the can on the bench, and little specks of brown liquid came out.

Laura gasped. She didn't know what that word meant exactly, but she knew it was one of the worst ones.

"I'm telling!"

Rose didn't even care; she just walked right out of the kitchen and back to her room to get ready. She was definitely not going to braid Laura's hair.

Laura jumped down from her stool. "I'm running away. You can't stop me!"

She ran to the front door and opened it and slammed it shut. Then she very quietly tiptoed away, so Rose would think she had left.

Laura decided to hide under her bed. She wriggled down on the floor and pulled the box of her winter clothes in front of her. If she stayed there for long enough, someone would notice she was gone. They would look for her but they wouldn't find her. Hiding was the one good thing about being small.

After a while, she started to get bored. It smelled funny under there, like the sports socks she wore all week long for her PE classes. She pulled herself back out. She was sick of this game now. As she sat cross-legged in the middle of her room, deciding whether it was the stuffed turtle's or the fluffy dog's turn to be played with, she noticed a shadow pass her window. Someone was coming to the front door of the house. Maybe her mum was home early!

She scampered to the entrance hall and opened the door but there was no one there at all. A wave of disappointment washed over her. Then she looked down. Someone had left her a present! She knelt down to look at it, wondering if it was a gift from Ben's ghost. To say thank you for not taking his little cat.

2

The denim shorts and tank Rose wore to work were crumpled in the corner of her bedroom. They were in need of a wash but she hadn't bothered today. Tugging the wrinkled clothes on, she could smell the sweat and beer caught in the fabric. By the end of her shift she'd reek.

Rose slipped her phone into her back pocket. Her fingers itched with its absence. All day, she had refreshed her email again and again and again. It was difficult to be patient.

She took her shoes out from under the bed. They were new, after the soles of her old ones had split from the canvas. They had been held together by threads and then she'd tripped on a beer keg and they'd ripped open like a mouth, her foot left exposed in the middle like a tongue. These new ones were cheap white sandshoes that already looked dirty. They had rubbed her heels raw last night. She winced a little as she pulled them on. Hopefully soon the material would soften, or her feet would harden.

Rose pulled her hair into a ponytail as she walked down the hall, her wrists flicking expertly. At first she didn't notice Laura, who was sitting on the floor, her back to Rose. It

wasn't like her to be quiet. The only time she ever was was when she was hiding under her bed.

She knew she'd be late, but still Rose stopped. Laura looked so tiny when she was quiet. Her shoulders were narrow as she hunched forward over her crossed legs. Moving closer, Rose realized she was talking very, very softly in a strange high-pitched voice.

"No, I want chocolate, please. Thank you. Yum, yum, yum."

"What are you doing?"

Laura looked up at her. "None of your beeswax!"

Rose squatted down next to Laura to see what was in her hands. It was an old-fashioned doll, with a porcelain face and hands and a cloth body. It was nothing like any of Laura's other toys. Weirdly, she noticed that it looked just like Laura, big brown eyes, brown hair in a bob, cut sharply at its jaw.

"Why'd you cut its hair? You've ruined it," she said.

"I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"Did not!"

"You did. You cut its hair so it would look like yours."

"I didn't! The person who gave it to me did it. They left it outside the front door. It's a present for me."

Rose touched the soft skin under Laura's chin so that she would look up.

"Are you fibbing? I won't be mad."

Laura held the doll in front of her and put on the high-pitched voice again. "Posey's just jealous. You're all mine!"

A strange feeling crept inside Rose then, a sense of something not being right. She considered taking the doll away, but Laura looked so content playing with her tiny twin. She was being stupid, she decided; of course someone didn't leave it for Laura. She must have borrowed it from another girl at school.

Leaving Laura to play, Rose left the house. She pulled the flywire screen door shut behind her and poked her finger through the broken netting to snip the lock closed. The thing was pointless. She remembered when she and her mother had installed it, years ago now, for security. These days it wouldn't have a hope of keeping intruders out; it would barely even protect them against blowflies.

The door was just like everything else in her life, in this town. After the car factory shut down, Colmstock had quickly lost its sense of purpose. Once, it had been pleasant. The largest town in the area and right off the Melton Highway, it was considered a nice place to stop off for a night on your way to the city. Small enough to have a strong community, but big enough that you could walk down the street without knowing every person you passed.

These days everything in Colmstock was broken and ugly. People weren't so friendly anymore. Too many residents had swapped a social drink or two for a meth habit. Crime rates were up, employment was down and yet the population stayed the same. It was as though everyone felt a sense of loyalty to the place. Well, Rose certainly didn't. She was getting out of here. Even the idea of it made her smile. The idea that this wouldn't be where she lived anymore, that she could have a whole different life. Realizing that her pace was slowing, she forced herself to stop dreaming. Her new life would start soon, but right now she was late for work.

Rose headed for Union Street, waving a hand over her face to keep away the flies. Even though the sun was up, she didn't feel safe walking alone. There was a much quicker route, but it meant going past the fossickers. She wouldn't do that no matter what time of day it was, so she had to circle around the long way. Slipping her phone out of her pocket, she refreshed her email again. Nothing. Her heart sank. They'd said they

would get back to her today. She couldn't bear to wait any longer. She had never been so ready for anything.

Since she was a kid, she'd always wanted to be a journalist. There had been a lot of setbacks, the local paper *The Colmstock Echo* closing being the worst one. Then she'd got an email saying she had been long-listed for a cadetship at the *Sage Review*, a national paper. A week later she was told she had been short-listed. Still, she hadn't let herself get too excited. It was just too good, too amazing to happen to her. Then just eight days ago she was down to the final two. It was just her and one other hopeful person out there refreshing their emails today.

Her friend Mia was certain she would get it. Rose had laughed and made some joke about whether she'd seen it in her crystal ball, but really, she had believed her. In her gut, Rose knew she was going to get the cadetship, for the simple fact that no one could want it as much as she did. It just wasn't possible.

She hurried past the lake, which was surrounded by dry knee-high grass, home to snakes and mosquitoes. It reeked of stagnant water. Next to it, the bare frame of a swing set stood, taken over by an insistent flowering weed. Someone had cut down the swings a few years back, leaving the skeleton of the frame. She wondered if the swings had been rehung in the backyard of one of the nearby houses or if they had been destroyed just for the entertainment of a few kids.

Rose turned away and picked up her pace, the rubber soles of her new shoes slapping against the sticky bitumen, trying not to remember how, once upon a time, when the water was still blue, she'd gone for picnics by that lake with her mother. Her mother, who had sat mute next to her new husband Rob James when he'd told Rose it was time for her to move out. It was okay, since the cadetship was in the city and board was part of the deal, but still, it had hurt.

She crossed over toward Union Street, careful to hop over the cane toad that was squished into the road. Here, people would swerve onto the wrong side in order to squash one. They'd stay there, flat as pancakes, covered in ants, until they turned stiff and hard like dry leather in the baking sun.

The main street of Colmstock was three blocks long. There was only one set of traffic lights and, farther up, a pedestrian crossing in front of the squat redbrick church. Not far from where she stood was a pub. She could see the dog racing on screens through one of its grimy windows, which were often splattered with blood from bar fights by the time it closed. There was the Chinese takeaway joint with its loud red lit-up sign, nestled between the Indian restaurant and the antiques store, which had both closed years ago.

Farther down was the primary school and the Colmstock council building. From where Rose stood, waiting for the lights to change so she could cross the street, she could almost see the burned-out courthouse. It stood between the library, which had escaped the blaze, and the grocery store, which hadn't. In front of the steps to the courthouse was the memorial to the kid who had died there, Ben Riley. The picture of him was fading, bleached by the constant sun. The building was cordoned off with plastic tape. Barricades should have been put up, but it hadn't happened yet.

Rose stared at the charred remains. Now that all the files inside the courthouse were ashes and the computers were melted blocks of plastic and wire, did that mean the scheduled trials wouldn't go ahead? Did it mean that people who would have been criminals no longer were? Would the law be put on hold until they rebuilt the place? Even from here, she could smell it. The burned wood, bricks and plastic frying in the sun. It had been three weeks and the smell hadn't

gone away. Maybe that was just how Colmstock would smell from now on.

Her pocket buzzed. Forcing herself to keep her hand steady, she took out her phone. She half expected it to be some dumb text message from Mia or a spam email. But it wasn't. She opened the *Sage Review*'s email, her mouth already tugging at the corners, ready to grin, ready to hold in a scream of excitement.

Dear Ms. Blakey,
Thank you for applying for the *Sage Review* Cadet Program. Unfortunately

Rose didn't read the rest. She couldn't.

Her mouth hadn't caught up yet. She was still smiling a strange hollow smile as she crossed the road to Eamon's Tavern Hotel.