



AFTER
ANNIE

a novel

ANNA
QUINDLEN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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A NOVEL

ANNA QUINDLEN



RANDOM HOUSE

NEW YORK

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Dedication

By Anna Quindlen

About the Author

Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.

—W. S. MERWIN

WINTER

Annie Brown died right before dinner. The mashed potatoes were still in the pot on the stove, the dented pot with the loose handle, but the meatloaf and the peas were already on the table. Two of the children were in their usual seats. Jamie tried to pick a piece of bacon off the top of the meatloaf, and Ali elbowed him. “Mom!” he yelled.

“Bill, get me some Advil, my head is killing me,” their mother said, turning from the stove to their father, her ponytail waving at them, her hair more or less the same shade and texture as the Irish setter’s down the street. She’d done the color herself, and she said she wasn’t happy with it, too brassy, but she figured she’d just let it go. Her husband said it looked fine. Of course he did.

“Bill,” she said again, looking at him with a wooden spoon raised in her hand, and then she went down, hard, the spoon skidding across the floor, leaving a thin trail of potatoes, stopping at the base of the stove. Ali didn’t see it because she was still policing her little brother, but she heard it.

Ant and Benjy came running in from the back room when they heard their dad yelling, “Annie! Annie! Jesus Christ!” Her husband tripped over the spoon as he ran to her, lifted her like it was nothing, and carried her into the living room. He pushed the coffee table into the wall with his foot so he could lay her down flat in the middle of the floor.

“Call 911, Ali,” he said to his daughter.

“What is your emergency?” said the woman, who had an accent that sounded like she was from somewhere else.

“My mother fell,” Ali said. It didn’t seem like enough, but she didn’t know what else to say.

“Give me the phone,” her father said. “Get out of the way.”

The kids all went back and sat still at the kitchen table as though if they moved it might make things worse. It was so quiet that Ali could hear them

all breathing, especially their father. After a few minutes there was the faint sound of a siren, the faraway sound the kids heard when they had been sent to bed and Annie and Bill were watching some cop show in the living room and had turned the volume down. The siren got louder until it was all around the five of them, in them, in their teeth and their skulls, and then it stopped, and *crash, crash, crash*, things moving outside, and then the crew was through the front door as their father held it open and their mother lay still. No one ever used the front door. If someone rang that bell, Annie always said, “Now who in the world can that be?” When the family came into the house, they came in through the kitchen. There was a mat there, bristly, brown, to wipe their feet on, and a bench inside to leave their shoes on. No outside shoes in the house—that was the rule. “Is she part Japanese?” Annie’s mother-in-law once asked.

It was weird, the kitchen and the living room like two different places, two different stories, two different planets. Behind the big arch that separated the two rooms, the four children sat at the kitchen table frozen into something like a family photograph, meatloaf, peas, salt, pepper, the Brown kids gathered for a weekday dinner, Jamie, the youngest, with a smear of barbeque sauce on his fat pink cheek.

The EMTs made a wall of blue canvas backs around Annie so that all you could see were her slippers, like her feet were all that was left of her. Bill Brown bounced from side to side, adrenaline all over, his eyes big and then blinking, big and then blinking, like someone in a movie who was trying to send secret distress signals without giving anything away to the bad guys. Annie’s slippers were purple and Bill had given them to her for Christmas even though she had told him she wanted a locket. They all heard her, a heart-shaped locket to put a picture in. “These are nice,” she’d said when she opened the box and found the slippers. She’d prepared herself; you couldn’t see a shoebox shape and think there was a locket inside unless your husband was the kind of man who would put a small box in a bigger one as a trick, and Bill wasn’t that kind of guy.

When she came home from working at the nursing home in the evening or the morning, depending on her shift, she would take off her rubber clogs

at the back door and put on the purple slippers. Sometimes Bill would smile when she did that, like he was thinking he'd done good. He said that when he was happy about something: "I done good."

There were the slippers, still, as if no one was wearing them, and there was Bill, bouncing up and down in the living room, his mouth open, panting. Hyperventilating, Ali said to herself, remembering Girl Scout training. She wondered if her father was going to faint, if there would be the two of them lying there on the rug, both their parents, their kids staring. "Stand back, Bill," one of the EMTs said, both men leaving wet, gray spots on the carpet from the old snow they'd picked up on their shoes outside. One of them was a man whose son used to be on Ali's Little League team. One of them was someone Bill and Annie had gone to high school with. They lived in that kind of place.

Jamie was still picking idly at the meatloaf so that one crispy corner of it was all picked out and most of the bacon was gone, but now Ali wasn't going to stop him. Ali was staring at her mother's feet. They hadn't moved once. She kept waiting for her mother to sit up and say "What happened?" or "I'm fine" or "Let me up." She kept waiting for the EMTs to do that thing with the paddles, to shock her mother's heart back to life. She figured that even if she couldn't see anything but the men's backs, she would hear that sound, *pop pop*, and her mother's feet would do a little jump. They had one of those machines in every hallway at the nursing home where her mother worked. Her mother had shown Ali when she'd visited once. "Do you know how to use that?" Ali had asked. "Of course," her mother said. "It wouldn't be much use to people if I didn't."

"Let's get her on the gurney," Ali heard one of the men say.

"What's a gurney?" Benjy whispered.

"I'm coming with you," their father said, and really fast they were out the door, him, her, the EMTs, and then there were all the hard metal sounds of things moving and slamming, the ambulance starting up and the siren wailing, then dwindling, as the ambulance moved off their street. The living room felt as empty as if there were no one home, the way Ali figured the house did in the mornings after they'd all gone to school and their parents

had left for work and the only sound was the furnace in the basement clicking on and off, the hot air whooshing up through the vents, the occasional creak of the hamster wheel from Ali's room.

It was quiet now except for the sound of Jamie sucking barbeque sauce off his fingers and some murmurs from outside that were the sounds of neighbors, even in the cold, on their front steps trying to figure out what was going on over at the Brown house. A siren didn't sound on their street without everyone coming out to see. They'd done the same thing themselves. Chimney fire, their father might say, sending everyone back inside as the fire engine backed down the block.

"Where are they going?" said Benjy.

"The hospital, dumbass," said Ant.

"Shut up," Ali said. "Don't be mean to him."

"You're not the boss," said Ant, like he always did.

"What happened to Mommy?" said Benjy.

"I don't really know," Ali said.

Ant and Ali didn't eat anything, but the two little boys had meatloaf and even some potatoes, though they were cold, with ketchup on it all. They didn't eat the peas because there was nobody to make them do it. "We should go to bed," Ali said. "We have school tomorrow." Jamie and Benjy went to their room, and when Ali checked on them they were asleep, their clothes on the floor, no face washing, no tooth brushing, but she wasn't going to wake them up for that. Benjy had his thumb in his mouth, and in the quiet she could hear him sucking on it, just the way she'd heard him when he was a baby and couldn't be without a pacifier for even a minute.

The little boys had bunk beds up against the wall, but Ant had a twin bed up against the window. He was lying down flat and staring out.

"Is she going to die?" he said without turning his head.

"What are you talking about?" Ali said kind of meanly, even though she was thinking the same thing. Her mother's feet, so still.

She went downstairs and sat on the living room couch. The house felt big all around her, even though it wasn't, like it had expanded without the grown-ups in it. It's not like they hadn't been left alone before with her in

charge, like after school when their parents were both late from work, or when their mother and father went to the diner for dinner. But that was always planned. Ali, put the mac and cheese in the oven. Make sure Jamie does his eye exercises. One hour of TV, and that's it. They never just got left like this, like everyone had forgotten they were even there.

She turned on the television and turned the sound down low, but she kept getting shows that had people laughing on them, so she finally put some news show on mute, just for a kind of company. In the silence she heard a faint tap that she thought was a branch hitting the window, but then it got louder and she realized it was at the back door.

Mrs. Lankford, who had lived next door since her father was a little boy, was standing on the step, her arms wrapped around herself. In the light over the door Ali could see a thick white wreath of cold-weather breath surrounding her beret, the fuzzy one with jewels around the rim. "That doesn't look like it does much to keep your head warm, Sally," Ali's grandmother had said once.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Mrs. Lankford said. "Everything okay? We saw the ambulance."

"My mother fell," Ali said again. What else could she say? She didn't know anything. And she hated to think it, but she thought Mrs. Lankford was only there to spread the word, whatever the word was, and if she did, the next thing Ali knew, her grandmother would be in the living room asking her questions she couldn't answer.

"Do you want company?" Mrs. Lankford said, clapping her hands. Her gloves matched her hat.

"I'm good, thank you. My father will be home soon."

"Well, you have my number if you need anything. Or just come right over. Don't worry about waking us up. I'm sure everything will be fine."

"Me too," Ali lied.

She felt as though she should call someone, but she didn't know whom, and she didn't know what she would say. She didn't want to talk to her grandmother, and her friend Jenny couldn't get calls after eight, and her aunt Kathy was hours away. There was Annemarie, there was always

Annemarie, but Ali remembered when she was much younger, her mother falling on the ice and thinking she might have broken her wrist, and saying to her father, “Don’t tell Annemarie, I don’t want to upset her. Whatever you do, don’t upset her.” Ali realized she only wanted to call someone to stop upsetting herself any further, to make this moment less scary, more real.

“It sounds like you got pretty dramatic about all this,” her mother would say when she got home.

The dinner dishes were still on the table, and Ali started to clean up, just to have something to do. Two years ago Benjy had hit his head against the corner of one of the lower kitchen cabinets and bled all over the rag rug by the sink, and after fifteen minutes of struggling with a butterfly bandage, their mother had decided they needed to go to the ER. “While I’m getting him ready, you put some foil over that lasagna,” she’d said to Ali. “We’re all going to be hungry when we get home.” Their father was out on a job, someone’s toilet overflowing or the water heater broken, and it was before they’d decided Ali was old enough to look after the others, so they’d all gotten in the car and gone to the branch of the big hospital up on the highway. There was a little soundproof room for kids, with cartoons on the TV. It seemed like it was so the cartoons and the kids wouldn’t disturb the people in the big waiting area, but it might have been so the kids didn’t hear the noises coming from the examining rooms. Ant said that when he went to the bathroom he heard somebody yelling “oh my God” over and over again. When their mother came to get them she was carrying Benjy, even though he was so tall and she so short that his bony legs dangled past her knees. “I’ve never heard someone make such a fuss about a hair clipper,” she said.

“Will he have a scar?” Ant said in the car.

“Probably,” their mother said. “That doctor was so young she probably still gets carded in a bar. But when his hair grows back you won’t even see it.” She’d been right about that, wrong about the lasagna. They’d eaten so much junk from the vending machines that Ant threw up in the kitchen once they got home. “Motherhood is such a pleasure,” Annie had said, mopping

the floor, putting the lasagna in the fridge, dabbing at the blood on her shirt with cold water.

Ali was picturing her mother in one of those hospital examining rooms now. “I just had a monster headache,” Annie would be telling the doctor. “Two Advil and I’ll be fine. I need to get home.” Ali tried to eat a piece of meatloaf. It tasted fine but felt bad, like gravel in her mouth, and she spit it into a napkin. Her mother had been on the morning-to-evening shift, six to six, so dinner had been a little late. The other shift, evening to morning, was better for everyone except maybe her mother. She’d make an early dinner, cover a plate with tinfoil if the two older ones had a sports practice or Bill was out on a late call, stick a chicken cutlet in a roll with a squirt of mayonnaise, and jump into the car, steering with one hand and holding what passed for her own dinner in the other. Back through the door just before sunup, and the kids would wake to the smell of coffee and maybe, if she was in the mood, pancakes or waffles.

Ali finished putting the dishes in the dishwasher and went and sat on the couch. She’d start to fall over a little bit, sleepy, but then would wake herself up. She had on the jeans she’d gotten for Christmas that had holes in the knees on purpose, and she picked at the scab from when she’d tripped on the steps outside the middle school. She hadn’t thought of that when she saw the jeans on one of the high school girls and decided she wanted them. “I don’t understand buying clothes already torn up,” Grandma Dora had said at Christmas dinner, and her mother had just shrugged. She’d said more or less the same thing herself when Ali asked for the jeans, but she wasn’t going to take her mother-in-law’s side.

Ali had never stayed awake all night, even at slumber parties when everyone said they would. There were some stray pieces of plastic on the living room carpet that the EMTs had left. She looked at them to see if she could figure out what they’d been used for, but they were just like the things left in the box when her father would put some toy together and there were pieces that didn’t seem to go anywhere. She was afraid to throw them away so she put them in the top drawer of the table next to the sofa. Inside there were two barrettes, a deck of cards, a knife with an orange handle that

was supposed to be good for pumpkin carving but wasn't, and a couple of pictures from when people took pictures with cameras. They were a little curled at the edges, like the leaves on the ground in fall. One was of Annie and Annemarie, their arms around each other, both of them wearing flowered dresses and sandals. You could tell that no one had had to tell them to smile for the camera; they both looked as happy as could be. Ali's mom said she couldn't recall exactly what they'd been doing that day, although she did remember that she'd loved that dress. It wasn't just that day—a lot of the times Ali had seen her mother look really happy were the ones when she and Annemarie were sitting at the kitchen table splitting a bottle of rosé, eating junk snacks, talking about how the woman who invented Doritos was a genius because they both knew it had to be a woman, right?

“That's my mother and her best friend,” Ali had told Jenny when they'd gone into the drawer looking for a pencil because they were playing Clue, and she had seen Jenny staring at the photograph.

“I don't think my mother has a friend like that,” Jenny had said. “We move around a lot.”

In the back of the drawer there was also a picture of her parents with Grandma Dora in front of the house. There was another picture of just her parents, same day, you could tell by the clothes, but that one was in an album her mother had in the bedroom. The next page of the album was a picture of the two of them at the restaurant the night they got engaged, then the wedding, then the two of them on the front lawn with baby Ali, then two kids, three. Annie told Annemarie once that it was like a flip book of her life, except that it had been so crazy the day she came home from the hospital with Jamie, Ali jumping up and down, Ant sulking, Benjy underfoot, that there was no picture of them all on the lawn with the new baby, who turned out to be the last baby. “The kitchen looked like a bomb hit it when I walked in that day,” their mother always said.

The couch was up against the wall of the living room, facing the windows. Before, it had been under the windows, and before that it had been catty-corner to the arch to the kitchen. Every once in a while their

mother liked to move the furniture around. “Come on, Bill,” she would say, and together they would push an end table across the carpet, lift the sofa, drag the recliner, until Annie would say, “The room looks so much bigger.” It wasn’t that big a room, and it always looked the same to Ali no matter where they put the furniture. The couch still felt a little strange where it was now.

Around one o’clock she really started to drift off, but then she felt the whole house shake, the floor humming beneath her feet, the bowl on the coffee table vibrating so it made a faint buzzing sound like a wasp in the house. First her mother, then an earthquake, she thought, only half awake, but then it slowed and stopped and she realized that the furnace was right beneath the living room and it had rumbled on.

Ali moved the bowl back to the center of the table. Annemarie had given it to her mother for her birthday. Her mother said that if you bought it in a craft store it would be two hundred dollars, and Ali’s father had said, “For a bowl?” It was one of those bowls you didn’t use for anything. “A decorative item,” said Annemarie, who was in the business of selling decorative items. This one was beautiful, deep blue turning to pale green as the sides sloped, with leaves etched into it.

You could scarcely tell it had been broken, although it was hard for Ali’s eyes not to go right to the break, despite how well her father had mended it. Benjy and Ant had been playing Space Rangers on the sofa, jumping off the arm onto the cushions on the floor, Benjy so excited by the fact that Ant was even acknowledging his existence that he got a little wild and careened off the corner of the coffee table. The bowl had skidded across the wooden surface and landed on the thin carpet and broken into two almost equal pieces, as though it had been created for the day when this would happen. The silence had alerted their mother to trouble in the next room, and when she saw the bowl it seemed like the silence doubled, tripled, with her eyes big and her lips pressed together. She had lifted a piece in each hand and gone into her bedroom. “Sorry, sorry, sorry, Mommy,” Benjy had said with his forehead against the door, and Ant put all the cushions back on the sofa.

“There’s no point in even having nice things,” Ali heard her mother say to her father that night when they were all in bed.

Ali went to the window and could see the irregular glitter of a few stray snowflakes spinning in the artificial glare and then falling out of sight. The rest of the street looked like one of the photographs in her grandmother’s oldest albums—black, dark gray, light gray, the occasional spot or shaft or line of pure white. The snow moon shone down on it all, much brighter than any spotlight. Their mother had promised to look up why the full moon the month before, in January, was called the wolf moon, but then she got busy and forgot. Sometimes, when it was warmer weather and they’d been up late for the church fair or a barbeque, she would take them outside and make them look up. “It’s the same moon over us all,” she said, “no matter where we go.”

“Where are we going?” Benjy had said, and their mother laughed and laid a hand on his head.

At one corner of the window frame there was some sort of break in the old wood, and Ali could feel the thin shaft of winter air like the steam whistling from the teapot, only cold, cold.

“This house needs new windows,” her father said every year about this time.

“Good luck with that,” her mother would reply.

Ali saw her own reflection in the window, but her face looked mostly like black holes—her eyes, the base of her nose, where her chin made the sharp turn into her neck. The flakes came down harder and she thought, Not a good night to drive. Her mother didn’t like to drive in snow. Her father didn’t care, although he always said the back end of the van fishtailed on the hills if they were packed down into ice and not gritted by the municipal trucks. If the snow came down harder, her father would have to be the one who drove home, Ali thought, and then as she looked beyond the spotlight she realized that the car and the van were there, that of course her parents both went in the ambulance. She hoped her grandmother wouldn’t be the one to drive them home from the hospital, her purse string of a mouth tight,

somehow blaming Ali's mother for what had happened. "Tripping over her own two feet, Bill, was that it?"

For some reason Ali started to think about what would happen if they got left, if her mother and father didn't come home by morning, if the ambulance had had an accident, which would be a weird thing, an ambulance having an accident instead of dealing with one, but it must happen sometimes. Annie always said that her daughter had a vivid imagination, but she didn't, not really. It was worry that made Ali think about things like this, not imagination at all. It was considering the worst things, like how she would do on her math exam if she didn't study or what would happen if she crashed into the wall of the gym chasing a loose basketball. She imagined the red F at the top of the paper, the sunburst of blood as her nose collided with the gym wall, even though she always studied, always stopped herself before she was out of bounds. Even if her mother was only in the hospital for a few days, like she had been with the new baby who was supposed to come after Jamie three years ago who didn't turn out to be a baby after all, Grandma Dora would move in and talk all the time about how hard it was to take care of four kids, and how great she was for doing it. "This better be the last one," she said to Bill when he'd said his wife was pregnant again. Which had turned out to be true.

It was cold in the house. The furnace hadn't stayed on for long. There was a new thermostat that had a timer so that they wouldn't waste fuel oil keeping the house warm while everyone was in bed. "It's freezing in here," her mother said almost every morning. "It'll warm up," her father said if he wasn't already at work. It seemed like they liked that, that they said the same things over and over again, back and forth. They did that a lot.

Ali looked at the clock on the cable box. 3:11 it said, when the sound of someone opening the back door woke her, and she sat up straight and wiped her mouth with its snail trail of spit down the side where her head had been on the arm of the couch. Her father saw her sitting there, her hands clasped, and he fell down on the floor, on his knees, and started to cry.

As far as she was concerned, that was the worst part of the night so far.

“Bill, get me some Advil, my head is killing me,” her mother had said, and then she went down, just like that, one last wave goodbye from the thick, ragged ribbon of her ponytail. She hadn’t even had time to take her hair down after work. “Like a ton of bricks,” she used to say if someone fell at the nursing home where she was an aide. Ali remembered afterward what her mother had said in the kitchen word for word, because in books and movies, last words were special, something like “Look after my four wonderful children.” But maybe just in books and movies.

Her father’s hands had a lot of scars on them from work, and he was holding them in front of his face like he was trying to keep the tears in, but there were so many that the rug was turning from tan to brown in front of him, in front of the line of dirty footprints leading to where he knelt. In books and movies Ali would have hugged him and he would have hugged her and they would have both felt a little better. But he didn’t get up from the floor, and Ali didn’t get off the couch. They didn’t move. They couldn’t move.

“Oh my God,” he said. “What the hell am I going to do?” He didn’t say more, and Ali didn’t ask, but she knew then that her mother was dead.