



Anna Polonyi

NEW COMMISSION

Angel's Story

Anna Polonyi is a French-American-Hungarian writer and journalist. She is the author of the poetry chapbook *Wayword*, written on the Camino de Santiago. She holds an M.F.A in fiction from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and teaches creative writing at the Iowa Young Writers' Studio. She's currently working on both a novel and a memoir on growing up as a 'Third Culture Kid'.

In Spring 2021, Anna Polonyi was appointed the first Virtual Writer in Residence at Central Library by Manchester Literature Festival and Manchester City of Literature for the inaugural Festival of Libraries. As part of her residency, she was commissioned to create a short story inspired by her research, readings and conversations with colleagues in Manchester.

Anna visited Manchester in August 2021 for the first time. During her visit, Modify Productions filmed her exploring Central Library and reading *Angel's Story* in the Chief Librarian's Office. Anna discussed her story, writing, reading, fairy tales and the importance of LGBTQ+ voices in a special MLF DIGITAL event recorded with local writer and host Kate Feld in Autumn 2021. The event was available to watch from 1- 30 November 2021 on Manchester Literature Festival's Vimeo page.

www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

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ANGEL'S STORY

This text was found in the archives of the Manchester Central Library. It is believed to be the lost page from The Reading Girl, a statue to be found on the left stair landing in Shakespeare Hall. Created by an Italian sculptor, Giovanni Ciniselli (1832-1883), the statue was bought by Daniel Adamson, the first chairman of the Manchester Ship Canal Company, and given to the library in 1938. Records show that she was originally reading a text called 'Angel's Story' printed on paper and pasted into her marble book but by the time she came to the library, the paper had disappeared and librarians were unable to trace it.

The Grimm brothers got it wrong, there weren't twelve of us but thirteen. I hated dancing. While my sisters all hurried off in their slippers, I stayed in bed and read. Balls are so boring anyway. And someone had to keep watch over the door. Yes, let me braid those ribbons into your hair, yes, that powder, just so, yes, I'll help you with the trap-door, let me hold your purse while you fumble in the darkness below.

What a relief, when my sister's chatter died down. I could sit down, angle the light and find my place on the page once more.

No one ever asked us why we went dancing. Our father was ready to murder his best men and the men were ready to wager their lives. Even the old soldier, when he finally figured out where it was, we went each night, was so dazzled by the gold and the silver he found there, that he forgot to ask us: why?

I used to be my father's favourite, he called me Angel. He was a man who stuck to his word, a man who loved rules. He let me sit in his lap and read the books he never had time for, and sometimes, to everyone's horror—except my own—turned to me for advice on who should live and who should die. But after our mother's death, he turned bitter. There was a terrible row: my eldest sister wanted to go out, he wouldn't let her. That same night, after we were all finally settled in bed, those of us closest to the door heard the clink of a key, the soft turn of the latch. He'd locked us in for the night.

Our eldest sister leapt to her feet. How dare he, she cried. Our mother, if she were here, would never have allowed this. Our mother, bless her, would have taken our side. Our mother, would we believe it, had married a tyrant: did we think she'd wanted thirteen kids? The younger ones began to cry. Some of us told her to shut up. All of us felt ashamed: if he punished us, we'd clearly done something to deserve it. My sister promised to give him a real earful. Come morning, he'd get a taste of her mind.

At breakfast the next day, she sat at the very end of the long table, looking into her plate. She sliced his bread for him, like she always did. He talked about the changing season, the holiday to come. No one mentioned what he'd done.

That night, and those after, it became harder and harder to sleep. The sounds outside made us jump. Those of us who did drift off dreamt of fires, floods. Knowing we couldn't be trusted to venture out to the kitchen on our own, we started to hoard food: fruit, cheese, sausages and bread in case we got hungry in the night. The fruit rotted, the cheese grew furry. The bread attracted mice. The sausage swarmed with ants that marched along the walls, and our room began to smell, to creep, to crawl.

One night, my eldest sister clapped her hands. 'Enough is enough,' she said. Her bed sunk into the floor and a trap-door flew open. We stared at it in amazement. Our mother had told us once before: when life feels like it's too much to bear, you will always have this secret door, an underground realm you can go to, that no one, no matter how hard they try, can take away.

My sister went down first, then one by one, we followed. We loved the grove of trees, glittering with silver leaves. How they rustled in the wind. How they turned golden, then clear as diamonds as you came closer to the lake. The water was limpid, nothing like the murky rivers above, and the moon shone, dazzling, in its surface. And the row-boats, engraved, one for each of us, and the princes, delighted that we'd made it, waiting by the oars.

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Much later, after the old soldier married my sister and became king, he wanted the underground lake drained, the groves cut down, the gold, silver and diamonds gathered, the princes put to work. He made my sister stand and clap by her old bed but the floor remained the floor. The engineers tore it up anyway, smashed the stone, drilled down and down, but all they found was rocks and silt and sand.

When you have twelve roommates, it's near impossible to get a moment to yourself. While they danced, I relished the quiet, stole all their pillows and snuggled in to read. Night after night, I tore through books: I learned that my father was not as wealthy as he thought, that though the land was in our name, some would claim it belonged to whoever worked it, that my stomach was kept full mostly through blind luck, but also force and fear. I read about other girls in other castles, about tyrannical fathers, sacrificial mothers. I got tired of those

stories, and read instead about herbs, the ancient sea that turned to stone, the buried forest we could now burn. I read about torrential rains and blazing summers, about all the things we no longer know quite what to do with and so we call waste, about the very earth itself tilting off its axis.

When our father discovered our worn-down slippers, he did not ask us a single thing. He only roared and railed at what daughters he had raised. He called to all men in the kingdom to come and rat us out, spy on us while we slept, bend over our beds—where were we going at night? Whoever found out would earn the crown and one of us as wife. Whoever failed would be beheaded.

What creeps, my eldest sister said, when we saw them lining up outside. The youngest ones began to cry. Some of us told her to shut up. I remembered what I'd read about poppies and we hatched our plan. The youngest ones picked them, the older ones scored the pods, the eldest dosed the drops and we all watched them plop-plop-plop.

One by one, the men came and we made them tell us about their lives until they were parched. When they'd drunk the wine we offered, we waited to hear their snores. It was hard to watch, that moment when it dawned on them they'd failed. By the time the old soldier arrived, the row of heads on spikes had nearly come full circle, all around the palace grounds. By day, my sisters and I barely dared to look at each other. We kept dropping plates, scuffing toes, stumbling on the stairs. By night, they danced so hard, it was like our own feet were on fire. It was time for all this to stop.

The old soldier could have been old enough to be our father. When he began to snore, we argued about what to do. 'Why should he die too?' 'It was his choice to come.' 'Didn't he

have anything better to do?' 'You'd think he'd have been wiser.' Down the trap-door they went, I sat there, trying to read. But the words were strung together, stale and I was still on the same sentence when I saw the door open of its own accord. I could have tried to stop him, but I thought of the row of heads outside, my father's grief, my sisters' bloodied feet. The old soldier had been through battle in our name, he'd seen enough. I pretended not to hear him struggling down the trap-door.

The next morning, he showed our father the three branches: gold, silver, diamonds. I could see our father doing sums as he looked at us, bewildered. He flung his crown into a corner. The old soldier picked it up.

I write this as the walls have begun to tremble. The engineers have warned our new king: the palace's foundations have been reached. It gets more and more dangerous by the day. I'm sending this to you, dear sculptor, not because you can help, but because perhaps you can understand. The ceilings are webbed with cracks, the floors are sinking, and still, the new king digs, trying to find the groves.

By now, we've all learned to go barefoot. The princes wait with soft, new slippers, laid out on the little bench in our boats. One pair for each of my sisters, just the right size. One day, our palace will crumble, and we'll be here, by the side of the lake. I've been saving my books, stashing them in the trees. I've found a prince to row them over to the other side. He says there's a library there, so full of books, they've had to dig underground and store them, four stories deep. I sit by the edge of the water, watch it tremble with the sound of drills, jackhammers, saws. I sit, with my book in my lap, waiting up, standing guard.