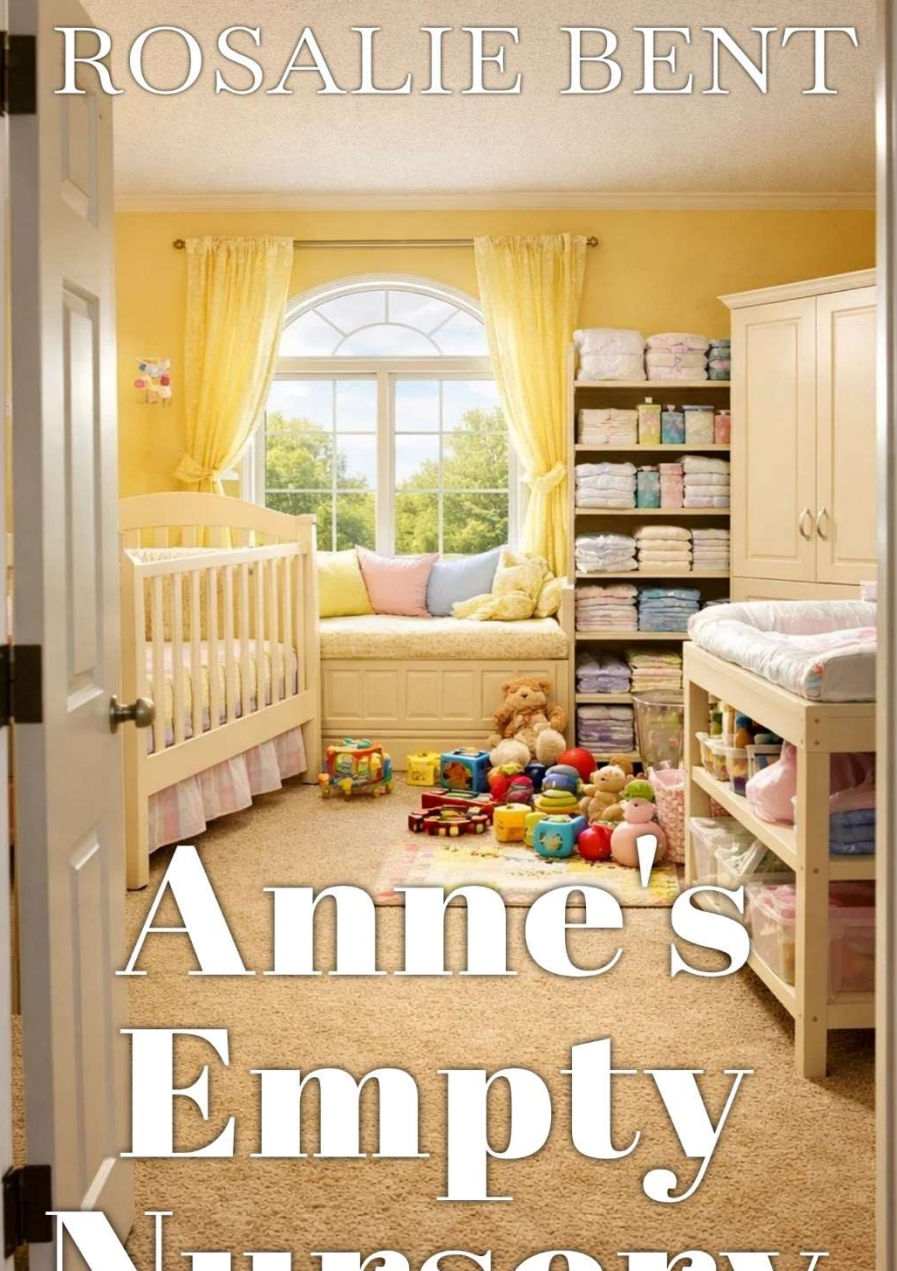


An AB Discovery Book

ROSALIE BENT

A photograph of a nursery room, viewed through an open white door. The room features a white crib on the left, a window seat with a yellow cushion and colorful pillows in the center, and a white cabinet with shelves of folded linens on the right. The floor is covered with a patterned rug and various toys, including a teddy bear and colorful blocks. The walls are painted a warm yellow color, and the window is framed by yellow curtains. The overall atmosphere is bright and cozy.

Anne's  
Empty  
Nursery

# Anne's Empty Nursery

by  
Rosalie Bent

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***Anne's Empty Nursery***

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## Chapter One: The Bench

The park was at its best in the early morning, before the joggers arrived with their earphones and their purposeful expressions, before the dog walkers came in chattering clusters. Anne liked it best when it was nearly empty with just the light coming low across the lake and the ducks moving in their unhurried way along the margins of the water, and the willows trailing their fingers in the shallows as though testing the temperature.

She came every morning at half past seven. It had been her habit for eleven years, since the year she turned thirty-nine and understood, with a clarity that had settled over her not like a blow but like a slow and patient tide, that certain things were not going to happen for her. A husband. A family of the conventional kind. She had made her peace with that, or rather, she had made something more honest than peace - an acknowledgement. She had looked at her life squarely and said *yes, this is what it is* and had walked to the park and sat on the bench and watched the ducks and had come back the next morning and done it again.

The bench was hers by habit if not by right. The third one along the east path, set back slightly from the water's edge, with a clear view of the widest part of the lake where the light gathered in the mornings. She had sat on it in every weather. She knew the precise sound it made when she settled her weight onto it in winter, when the timber contracted in the cold, and the way the iron armrest warmed under her hand in July if she came a little later than usual.

She sat down now and set her small thermos on the bench beside her and folded her hands in her lap.

Daniel would have been forty-six this year.

The thought arrived the way it always did, quietly, without announcement, the way familiar things did. It was not a wound anymore. More like a scar she touched occasionally to remind herself it was there, that it was real, that *he* had been real.

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He had been her baby brother. Truly her baby, in the way that only a ten-year gap between siblings could make possible. By the time Daniel was born, Anne had been old enough to understand what it meant to love someone small and helpless and entirely dependent, and young enough to feel it with her whole body. It was a ferocious, uncomplicated tenderness that she had never quite found the words for, even now. She had held him in the hospital. She remembered the weight of him, the astonishing warmth, the way his face had been scrunched and furious at first and then, when she began talking to him in a low voice, had slowly, incrementally, relaxed.

He had been sickly from the start. Not dramatically, not in the way of hospital corridors and urgent telephone calls, at least not in those early years, but consistently, constitutionally fragile. He caught everything. He ran fevers that lasted for days. There was something with his kidneys that the doctors had monitored with careful, noncommittal faces for most of his childhood. The result of it was that he had worn nappies long past the age when other children shed them. Thick cloth ones, pinned at the sides, bulking out beneath his trousers in that unmistakable way. Anne had thought nothing of it. Had thought less than nothing of it. It had simply been Daniel, simply been part of him, the way his fine pale hair was part of him and his particular laugh was part of him.

She had helped change him sometimes. Her mother had shown her without making it strange, because it wasn't strange, because Daniel needed it, and Anne was there and willing. She remembered the routine of it with a precision that still surprised her. She recalled the cool plastic of the changing mat, the safety pins set carefully aside, the powder and the folded new nappy and the way Daniel would look up at her with absolute trust while she worked. He had never been embarrassed. He had never, as far as she knew, been unhappy about it. It had simply been how he was.

*He would let me do it*, she thought, watching a mallard make its dignified way across the water. *He trusted me with everything.*

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He had died at twenty from an infection his body couldn't manage. It had been swift, in the end, which she supposed she was grateful for, though gratitude had taken years to locate. She had been thirty then, newly qualified as a librarian, living in a flat twenty minutes from her parents' house, and she had sat beside his hospital bed for three days and held his hand and talked to him, talked about the park, about the ducks, about nothing in particular, and then he had been gone.

The grief had been enormous, and it had taken a long time for her to move through it. But underneath the grief, in the years that followed, she had found something else... a want. A specific, shaped want, unlike anything she could fully explain even to herself. She had wanted a baby. She had known this. But when she pressed further, when she sat quietly with the want and tried to understand its precise nature, she had found that what she wanted was not quite what other women seemed to want. Not a helpless newborn she would shepherd through years of milestones toward independence and then watch them leave. What she wanted was something that resisted easy description, a baby who was also somehow present, aware, a person in their own right. She would find her mind skating away from the thought before she could complete it, as though her own imagination was uncertain of the destination.

She understood it more now than she had then. She was older and had lived inside the want for long enough to know its shape. But she still couldn't have explained it to anyone else, and she had long since stopped trying, even in the privacy of her own thoughts.

*A baby boy*, she thought simply, when she let herself think it at all. *My baby boy*.

After Daniel had gone, she had built the nursery. Not immediately. It had taken her years to buy the house, and several more years before she allowed herself to act on what she felt. But once she had started, she had been methodical and unhurried about it, the way she was about everything she cared for deeply. She had

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given over the largest spare room. She had measured and painted and ordered and assembled, making each decision carefully, living with each element before committing to it. The large cot had come third, after the changing table and the wardrobe. She had spent three weeks deciding on the cot. The room was pale yellow now, warm in the mornings, with a border of hand-painted detail that she had done herself over the course of a quiet winter. Everything in it was sized for an adult. Everything in it was right. Perfect.

She had never told anyone about the nursery. Her friends, few and well-chosen, had never seen it. The door stayed closed. She had made no secret of its existence but offered no explanation, and people who knew her well knew not to press.

The nursery had been ready for a long time now. She knew this with a quiet, settled certainty. It was waiting. She had always believed, in a way she couldn't have justified to anyone, that the person it was waiting for would come.

She just hadn't known when, or how.

A young couple came into view along the far path, the woman pushing a pram and a man walking alongside with his hands in his pockets. They were talking, not looking at each other, the easy half-attention of people entirely comfortable together. Anne watched them approach. In the pram, a small boy was sitting up against his cushions with a toy in his fist, regarding the world with that sovereign, serious expression that very young children had. He was perhaps eight months old. He wore a pale blue jacket, and his hair was the fine, fair kind.

Anne watched him until they passed out of sight along the bend in the path.

She poured tea from her thermos into the small cup, held it in both hands and let the warmth come through.

*Tomorrow*, she thought, the way she always thought it. *Come back tomorrow.*

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She drank her tea and watched the ducks on the water, and the morning light strengthened over the lake, and the park filled slowly and quietly around her, and she sat very still, as she had learned to do, and she waited.

## Chapter Two: The Young Man

She saw him on a Thursday.

She knew it was a Thursday because she had come slightly later than usual. She had a shift at the community centre on Thursday mornings and had stopped at the bakery on the way, so it was nearly nine when she reached the bench, and the park was fuller than she liked it, the paths already threaded with people. She had been mildly out of sorts about this in the small, manageable way that disrupted routine produced in her, and she had sat down with her paper bag and her thermos and made a deliberate effort to let the lake settle her. She had been watching the water for perhaps ten minutes when she became aware of him.

He was on the far path, the one that curved around the northern edge of the lake before meeting the east path at the old oak near the water fountain. He was walking slowly. That was the first thing she noticed, not who he was or how he looked, but the style of his walking, which was entirely without destination. She knew purposeless walking when she saw it. She had done enough of it herself, in her thirties, in the years after Daniel, on days when the flat had felt too small and the world outside it too large and there had seemed no particular reason to go anywhere but an equally good reason not to stay. She recognised it as a specific kind of loneliness, the kind that needed to be carried somewhere, even if there was nowhere to carry it.

He was slight. Young. From this distance, she put him somewhere around twenty, perhaps a little less, though she had never been reliably accurate about young men's ages. He was wearing dark trousers and a grey hooded sweatshirt that was a size too large, the hood down, his hands pushed into the front pocket. His head was slightly lowered, not enough to suggest he was watching his feet, more as though he was simply carrying something heavy that happened to be located somewhere in the front of his chest.

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Anne watched him the way she watched everything at the park, with the patient, undemanding attention she had cultivated over the years. She was not staring. She was simply present, and he happened to be within the range of her presence.

Then he shifted slightly in his walk, adjusting his gait to step around a puddle left by last night's rain, and the movement changed the fall of his trousers, and Anne went very still.

She knew what she was looking at. She had known it her entire life, the way you knew certain things not from learning but from having lived with them for long enough that recognition bypassed thought entirely. The particular way fabric pulled and gathered, the unmistakable added bulk below the waistband, the slight stiffness of movement that came with it, the rolling, unhurried quality of a walk shaped around something worn close to the body.

He was wearing nappies.

They were cloth ones, she thought, from the look of it, or possibly the thicker kind of disposable, the kind that presented much of the same silhouette. The trousers were not particularly tight, but they were not hiding it either, not to someone who knew how to see it. She doubted that anyone else on the path had noticed anything at all.

Her hands, she realised, were pressed flat against her thighs. She made herself breathe.

He was still walking. He hadn't noticed her, hadn't glanced in her direction, was simply moving along the far path with that same adrift, unhurried pace, and she watched him without moving until he reached the bend in the path and passed behind the stand of willows and was gone.

Anne sat for a long moment, looking at the place where he had been.

The feeling that had come over her was not simple. She understood, in the part of her that dealt in understanding, that what she had felt, the arrest of breath, the pressure behind the sternum,

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and the sudden absolute stillness, was not simply recognition of the kind she had hoped for in twenty years of private hoping. It was something older and more specific than that. Something that had reached back through her, past the nursery with its pale-yellow walls and its patient, waiting cot, past the long years of the want, past even the want itself, to a place much further back.

Daniel.

Not rationally. She was not a fanciful woman, and she knew perfectly well that a young man walking in a park was not her dead brother. But the mind is not always rational, and grief is never rational, and what had moved through her when she watched that slight figure make his unhurried way around the northern path had carried Daniel's weight in it as surely as if she had heard his name spoken aloud.

It was the walk, she thought. Partly the walk, that careful quality she remembered, the way Daniel had moved when he was thickly padded and comfortable, not self-conscious about it at all, simply moving the way his body moved, taking up the space he needed to take up. She had loved that about him, the way he had never, at home at least, been ashamed of what he needed. He had simply been himself, without apology, trusting that the people around him would love him as he was. They had. She had.

And partly it was the age. She was aware of this. She was not naive about her own thinking. She had spent enough time sitting with her feelings on this particular bench to know them with some accuracy. He was twenty, approximately, the age Daniel had died at, the age he had always been in her mind, the age that remained fixed while she aged around it year by year, so that now she was thirty years older than the brother she still thought of as being twenty, and the gap had an almost abstract quality to it. There was less grief now, and in its place was a kind of permanent, weathered tenderness.

This young man was twenty. Was walking in that particular way. Was alone in that particular manner.

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She was not going to make anything of it. She was fifty years old and a sensible woman, and she had disappointments enough in her history to know better than to construct a life around a single glimpse of a stranger crossing a park.

But she came back the next morning.

Of course, she came back the next morning.

She was on the bench by seven-fifteen, thermos in hand, the park nearly empty, the light still deciding what it wanted to do with the day. She sat and watched the lake and told herself she was simply having her morning walk, as she had every morning for eleven years, and that whatever happened or didn't happen had nothing to do with anything.

He was there at half past eight.

He came along the Same path, the same hands in the front pocket of the sweatshirt, which was a different colour today, dark navy. He had the same lowered head and the same quality of going nowhere in particular. She watched him make the slow circuit of the northern path from a distance, not allowing herself to look directly until he was closer, and then he was closer, and she let herself look.

He was... she searched for the right word and found it... *gentle*-looking. That was what she saw, up closer. A gentle face, not yet fully a man's face, still carrying the last of an adolescent softness around the jaw and the eyes, which were downcast. His hair was light brown and slightly too long, curling at the nape of his neck. He was thin in a way that concerned her faintly, not ill, not alarmingly so, but the thinness of someone not eating regularly or well enough, the kind she recognised from years of working with students in the library who came in before lunchtime and rarely left to eat.

The nappies were more obvious today. He was wearing lighter trousers, and he had perhaps worn this combination of clothing without thinking about it, or without caring, and the outline was clear and unambiguous, at least to her. He had that same walk. That same absence of self-consciousness that she thought was

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perhaps not boldness but simply a kind of depletion, a young man who had run out of the energy required to manage appearances and had let some things go.

She felt Daniel in him then with a force that almost took her breath away, because it hadn't just been the nappies with Daniel, and it hadn't just been the care he had needed. It had been this. Exactly this quality. The gentleness. The slightly-not-quite-fitted-to-the-world look that Daniel had carried, as though the world had been designed for a slightly different kind of person and Daniel was doing his best to move through it graciously anyway. She had always wanted to protect him from the rougher edges of things, had always stood, when they were out together, at a slight angle that put herself between him and whatever might be difficult.

She looked at this young man moving slowly along the far path and felt that same angle in her body, that same instinctive positioning, the way you turned toward something you meant to shelter.

*Don't, she told herself. You don't know him. You don't know anything about him.*

All of which was true.

She poured her tea and held it and watched him finish his slow circuit and disappear from view, and she sat with what she was feeling and tried to examine it clearly, the way she always examined things she cared about, turning it in the light, looking at it from each side, not pretending it was something other than what it was.

She was fifty years old. She had built a fully complete nursery that had been waiting empty for a decade. She had a brother she had lost at thirty who had been twenty, and this young man was twenty, and she had watched him for two mornings now and each time had felt something old and deep and specific move through her, not just the want that she had lived alongside all her adult life, but Daniel himself, somehow. Not his ghost. Not the grief. Just the nature of him,

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the gentleness, the need, the way she had loved him, not despite what he required but in no small part *because* of it.

She thought about the nursery, as she often did in this spot. The cot. The pale-yellow walls. The folded nappies in their stacks.

She thought, *I don't know his name. I don't know his circumstances. I don't know anything about him except what I've seen from fifty yards away on two consecutive mornings.*

Then she decided. *I'll come back tomorrow.*

She screwed the lid back onto her thermos.

On the lake, the ducks were in their usual conversation, the low sound of it carrying across the water, comfortable and unhurried.

Anne sat until the park had filled around her, and then she walked home through the morning in her steady, unhurried way, and she did not let herself think about it anymore for the rest of the day.

Mostly.