

Annie's History of Horror

' Paul, I have to go away for a while. '

'How long will you be gone, Annie?'

She was drifting dreamily toward the door now. 'I can't tell. I've brought you pills. You'll be all right. Take two every six hours. Or six every four hours. Or all of them at once.'

But what will I eat? he wanted to ask her, and didn't. He didn't want her attention to return to him — not at all. He wanted her gone. Being here with her was like being with the Angel of Death.

He lay stiffly in his bed for a long time, listening to her, movements, first upstairs, then on the stairs, then in the' kitchen, fully expecting her to change her mind and come back with the gun after all. He did not even relax when he heard the side door slam and lock, followed by splashing steps outside. The gun could just as easily be in the Cherokee.

Old Bessie's motor whirred and caught. Annie gunned it fiercely. A fan of headlights came on, illuminating a shining silver curtain of rain. The lights began to retreat down the driveway. They swung around, dimming, and then Annie was gone. This time she was not heading downhill, toward Sidewinder, but up into the high country.

Two hours later, Paul jimmied the bedroom's lock again and for the second time forced the wheelchair through the doorway that was almost too small. For the last time, he hoped. He had a pair of blankets in his lap. All the pills he had cached under the mattress were wrapped in a Kleenex tucked into his underwear. He meant to get out if he could rain or no rain; this was his chance and this time he meant to take it. Sidewinder was downhill and the road would be slippery in the rain and it was darker than a mineshaft; he meant to try it all the same. He hadn't lived the life of a hero or a saint, but he did not intend to die like an exotic bird in a zoo.

He went into the parlor. It had been tidy before, but now there were dirty dishes stacked on every available surface; it looked to Paul as if everyone in the house must be here. Annie apparently not only pinched and slapped herself when she was feeling depressed. It looked like she really chowed down as well, and never mind cleaning up after. He half-remembered the stinking wind that had blown down his throat during his time in the cloud and felt his stomach, clench. Most of the remains were of sweet things. Ice-cream had dried or was drying in many of the bowls and soup dishes. There were crumbs of cake and smears of pie on the plates. A mound of lime Jell-O covered with a crack-glaze of dried whipped cream stood on top of the TV next to a two-liter plastic bottle of Pepsi and a gravy-boat.

He rolled across the room. Straight ahead was the kitchen. On the right a wide, short hallway went down to Annie's front door. Beside this hallway a flight of stairs went up to the second floor. Giving the stairs only a brief glance (there were drips of ice-cream on some of the carpeted stair levels and glazey smears of it on the banister), Paul rolled down to the door. He thought that if there was going to be a way out for him, tied to this chair as he was, it would be by way of the kitchen door — the one Annie used when she went out to feed

the animals, the one she galloped from when Mr Rancho Grande showed up — but he ought to check this one. He might get a surprise.

He didn't.

He reversed down the hall, fighting panic, reminding, himself he hadn't expected much from the front door anyway. He pivoted the chair once he was in the parlor and rolled into the kitchen. This was an old-fashioned room with bright linoleum on the floor and a pressed-tin ceiling. The refrigerator was old but quiet. There were three or four, magnets stuck to its door — not surprisingly, they all looked, like candy: a piece of bubble-gum, a Hershey Bar, a Tootsie Roll. One of the cabinet doors was open and he could see shelves neatly covered with oilcloth.

Annie's larder looked more like a survivalist's bomb shelter than a pantry. There were lots of sardines in those flat rectangular cans with the key under the paper. Good. He would have some of those. Tins of deviled ham.

His legs were beginning to hurt. He decided that if he, wasn't going to escape or burn the house down, he ought go on back to his room. He reversed out of the pantry, pausing to turn off the light, reminding himself that he must (rinse) put everything back in order as he made his retreat. If he ran out of food before she came back, he could always return for more (*like a hungry rat, right, Paulie?*) But he must not forget how careful he must be. It would not do to forget the simple fact that he was risking his life every time he left his room. Forgetting that would not do at all.

As he was rolling across the parlor, the scrapbook under the coffee table caught his eye again. MEMORY LANE. It was as big as a folio Shakespeare play and as thick as a family Bible.

Curious, he picked it up and opened it. Fascinated, his pain temporarily forgotten, Paul turned the page.

FIVE DIE IN APARTMENT HOUSE FIRE

Five persons, four of them members of the same family, died in the early hours of Wednesday morning, victims of a smoky three-alarm fire in a Bakersfield apartment house on Watch Hill Avenue. Three of the dead were children — Paul Krenmitz, 8, Frederick Krenmitz, 6, and Alison Krenmitz, 3. The fourth was their father, Adrian Krenmitz, 41.

He turned the page.

Here was yet another *Bakersfield Journal* clipping, this one dated July 19th, 1957. It featured a picture of Carl Wilkes, looking slightly older. One thing was clear: it was as old as he was ever going to get. The clipping was his obituary.

BAKERSFIELD ACCOUNTANT DIES IN FREAK FALL

Carl Wilkes, a lifelong Bakersfield resident, died shortly after being admitted to Hernandez General Hospital last night. He apparently stumbled over a pile of loose clothing, which had been left on the stairs earlier, while on his way down to answer the phone. Dr Frank Canley, the admitting physician, said that Wilkes died of multiple skull fractures and a broken neck. He was 44. Wilkes is survived by his wife, Crysilda, a son, Paul, 18, and a daughter, Anne, 14.

When Paul turned to the next page, he thought for a moment that Annie had pasted in two copies of her father's obituary out of sentiment or by accident (he thought this latter the more likely possibility of the two). But this was a different accident, and the reason for the similarity was simplicity itself: neither had really been an accident at all.

He felt stark and simple terror steal into him. The neat handwriting below this clipping read *Los Angeles Call, January 29th, 1962.*

USC STUDENT DIES IN FREAK FALL

Andrea Saint James, a USC nursing student, was pronounced dead on arrival at Mercy Hospital in North Los Angeles last night, the apparent victim of a bizarre accident.

Miss Saint James shared an off-campus apartment on Delorme Street with a sister nursing student, Anne Wilkes, of Bakersfield. Shortly before eleven P.M., Miss Wilkes heard a brief scream followed by 'terrible thudding sounds'. Miss Wilkes, who had been studying, rushed onto the third-floor landing and saw Miss Saint James lying on the landing below, 'sprawled in a very unnatural position'. Miss Saint James, a native of Los Angeles, was 21.

'Jesus.' Paul whispered it over and over. His hand was shaking badly as he turned the page.

But why, Annie? These clippings tell me everything but that.
WHY?

He turned the page and discovered another clipping from the *Bakersfield Journal* — the last, as it turned out. The headline read MISS WILKES IS NURSING SCHOOL GRADUATE. Hometown girl makes good. May 17th, 1966. The photo was of a younger, startlingly pretty Annie Wilkes, wearing a nurse's uniform and cap, smiling into the camera. It was a graduation photograph, of course. She had graduated with honors. *Only had to kill one roommate to do it, too*, Paul thought, and donkeyed his shrill, frightened laugh.

Why, for God's sake? WHY? With Annie Wilkes that is a question which has no sane answer. As you well know.

This book, dear God, this book was so big!

No more, please. I don't want to look at any more. I've got the idea. I'm going to put this book down exactly where I found it. Then I am going into my room. I guess I don't want to write after all; I think I'll just take an extra pill and go to bed. Call it nightmare insurance. But no farther down Annie's Memory Lane, if you please. Please, if you please.

But his hands seemed to have a mind and a will of their own; they kept on turning the pages, faster and faster. Two more brief death notices in the *Union-Leader*, one in late September of 1969, one in early October. March 19th, 1970. This one was from the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, *Herald*. A back page.

NEW HOSPITAL STAFF ANNOUNCED.

There was a photo of a balding, bespectacled man who looked to Paul like the type of fellow who might eat boogers in secret. The article noted that in addition to the new publicity director (the balding, bespectacled fellow), twenty others had joined the staff of

Riverview Hospital: two doctors, eight R.N.'s, assorted kitchen staff, orderlies, and a janitor.

Annie was one of the R.N.'s.

Numbly, Paul continued to turn the pages while the wind and rain drove against the house. The pattern was inescapable. She got a job, killed some people, and moved on.

She had moved steadily westward. Harrisburg to Pittsburgh to Duluth to Fargo. Then, in 1978, to Denver. In each case the pattern was the same: a 'welcome aboard' article in which Annie's name was mentioned among others (she had missed the Manchester 'welcome aboard' probably because, Paul guessed, she hadn't known that local newspapers printed such things), then two or three unremarkable deaths. Following these, the cycle would start again.

Until Denver, that was.

At first, it seemed the same. There was the *NEW ARRIVALS* article, this time clipped from the in-house newspaper of Denver's Receiving Hospital, with Annie's name mentioned.

Then the pattern broke wide open.

'Christ, how many did she kill?'

If it was right to equate each obituary pasted in this book with a murder, then her score was more than thirty people by the end of 1981 . . . all without a single murmur from the authorities. Of course most of the victims were old, the rest badly hurt, but still . . . you would think . . .

In 1982 Annie had finally stumbled. The clipping from the January 14th *Camera* showed her blank, stonelike face rendered in newsprint dots below a headline which read:

NEW HEAD MATERNITY WARD NURSE NAMED.

On January 29th the nursery deaths had begun.

Annie had chronicled the whole story in her meticulous way. Paul had no trouble following it. *If the people after your hide had found this book, Annie, you would have been in jail or some asylum — until the end of time.*

The first two infant deaths had not aroused suspicion—a story on one had mentioned severe birth defects. But babies, defective or not, weren't the same as old folks dying of renal failure or car-crash victims brought in still somehow alive in spite of heads which were only half there or steering-wheel-sized holes in their guts. And then she had begun killing the healthy along with the damaged. He supposed that, in her deepening psychotic spiral, she had begun to see all of them as poor, poor things.

By mid-March of 1982 there had been five nursery deaths in the Boulder Hospital. A full-scale investigation was launched. On March 24th the *Camera* named the probable culprit as 'tainted formula'. A 'reliable hospital source' was cited, and Paul wondered if perhaps the source had not been Annie Wilkes herself.

Another baby had died in April. Two in May.

Then, from the front page of the June 1st *Denver Post*:

HEAD MATERNITY NURSE QUESTIONED
ON INFANT DEATHS

No Charges Made 'As Yet,' Sheriff's Office Spokeswoman Says
By Michael Leith

Anne Wilkes, the thirty-nine-year-old head nurse of the maternity ward at Boulder Hospital, is being questioned today about the deaths of eight infants — deaths which have taken place over a span of some months. All of the deaths took place following Miss Wilkes's appointment. When asked if Miss Wilkes was under arrest, Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Tamara Kinsolving said she was not.

He looked at the accompanying photograph, fascinated. Annie in custody. Dear God, Annie in custody; the idol not fallen but teetering . . . teetering . . . She was mounting a set of stone steps in the company of a husky policewoman, her face dull, devoid of expression. She was wearing her nurse's uniform and white shoes.

Next page:

WILKES RELEASED, MUM ON INTERROGATION.

She'd gotten away with it. Somehow, she'd gotten away with it. It was time for her to fade out and show up someplace else — Idaho, Utah, California, maybe. Instead, she went back to work. And instead of a NEW ARRIVALS column from somewhere farther west there was a huge headline from the Rocky Mountain News front page of July 2nd, 1982:

The Horror Continues:
THREE MORE INFANT DEATHS IN BOULDER HOSPITAL

Two days later the authorities arrested a Puerto Rican orderly, only to release him nine hours later. Then, on July 19th, both the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News* announced Annie's arrest. There had been a short preliminary hearing in early August. On September 9th she went on trial for the murder of Girl Christopher, a female child one day of age. Behind Girl Christopher were seven other counts of first-degree murder. The article noted that some of Annie's alleged victims had even lived long enough to be given real names.

The prosecution wove its net as well as it could, but the handprint with the mark of the ring was really the most damning bit of evidence it could come up with. The fact that the State of Colorado had elected to bring Annie to trial at all, given such a slight chance of conviction on the evidence, left Paul with one assumption and one certainty. The assumption was that Annie had said things during her original interrogation which were extremely suggestive, perhaps even damning; her attorney had managed to keep the transcript of that interrogation out of the trial record. The certainty was that Annie's decision to testify in her own behalf at the preliminary hearing had been extremely unwise. *That* testimony her attorney hadn't been able to keep out of the trial (although he had nearly ruptured himself trying), and while Annie had never confessed to anything in so many words during the three days in August she had spent 'up there on the stand in Denver', he thought that she had really confessed to everything.

Excerpts from the clippings pasted in her book contained some real gems:

'Did they make me feel sad? Of course they made me feel sad, considering the world we live in.'

'I have nothing to be ashamed of. I am never ashamed. What I do, that's final, I never look back on that type of thing.'

'Did I attend the funerals of any of them? Of course not. I find funerals very grim and depressing. Also, I don't believe babies are ensouled.'

'No, I never cried.'

'Was I sorry? I guess that's a philosophical question, isn't it?'

'Of course I understand the question. I understand *all* your questions. I know you're all out to get me.'

If she had insisted on testifying in her own behalf at her trial, Paul thought, her lawyer probably would have shot her to shut her up.

The case went to the jury on December 13th, 1982. And here was a startling picture from the *Rocky Mountain News*, a photo of Annie sitting calmly in her holding cell and reading *Misery's Quest*.

IN MISERY?

the caption below asked.

NOT THE DRAGON LADY.

Annie reads calmly as she wait for the verdict.

And then, on December 16th, banner headlines:

DRAGON LADY INNOCENT.

In the body of the story a juror who asked not to be identified was quoted. 'I had very grave doubt as to her innocence, yes. Unfortunately, I had very reasonable doubts as to her guilt. I hope she will be tried again on one of the other counts. Perhaps the prosecution could make a stronger case on one of those.'

They all knew she did it but nobody could prove it. So she slipped through their fingers.

The case wound down over the next three or four pages. The D.A. said Annie surely *would* be tried on one of the other counts. Three weeks later, he said he never said that. In early February of 1983, the district attorney's office issued a statement saying that while the cases of infanticide at the Boulder Hospital were still very much alive, the case, against Anne Wilkes was closed.

Slipped through their fingers. Her husband never testified for either side. Why was that, I wonder?

There were more pages in the book, but he could tell, by the snug way most lay against each other that he was almost done with Annie's history up to now. Thank God.

He turned the page and looked at the last clipping — at least so far — and suddenly his breath was gone. It was as if, after wading grimly through the almost unbearable necrology in the foregoing pages, he had come face to face with his *own* obituary. It wasn't quite, but . . .

'But close enough for government work,' he said in a low, hoarse voice.

It was from *Newsweek*. The 'Transitions' column. Listed below the divorce of a TV actress and above the death of a Midwestern steel potentate was this item:

REPORTED MISSING: *Paul Sheldon, 42*, novelist best known for his series of romances about sexy, bubbleheaded, unsinkable Misery Chastain; by his agent, Bryce Bell. 'I think he's fine,' Bell said, 'but I wish he'd get in touch and ease my mind. And his ex-wives wish he'd get in touch and ease their bank accounts.' Sheldon was last

seen seven weeks ago in Boulder, Colorado, where he had gone to finish a new novel.

The clipping was two weeks old.

Reported missing, that's all. Just reported missing. I'm not dead, it's not like being dead.

But it *was* like being dead, and suddenly he needed his medication because it wasn't just his legs that hurt. *Everything* hurt. He put the book carefully back in its place and began rolling the wheelchair toward the guest room.

Outside, the wind gusted more strongly than it had yet done, slapping cold rain against the house, and Paul shrank away from it, moaning and afraid, trying desperately hard to hold himself together and not burst into tears.

An hour later, full of dope and drifting off to sleep, the sound of the howling wind now soothing rather than frightening, he thought: *I'm not going to escape. No way. You're on your own, Paulie. Dead flat on your own. But maybe that's okay. Because maybe you know what the answer is, after all, don't you?*

Yes, of course he did. If he meant to get out of this, he would have to kill her.

He rolled back into the kitchen and opened drawers until he found the knives. He selected the longest butcher-knife and went back to his room, pausing to rub away the hub-marks on the sides of the doorway. The signs of his passage were nevertheless becoming clearer.

Doesn't matter. If she misses them one more time, she misses them for good.

He put the knife on the night-table, hoisted himself into bed, then slid it under the mattress. When Annie came back he was going to ask her for a nice cold glass of water, and when she leaned over to give it to him he was going to plunge the knife into her throat.

Nothing fancy.

Paul closed his eyes and dropped off to sleep, and when the Cherokee came whispering back into the driveway that morning at four o'clock with both its engine and its lights shut off, he did not stir. Until he felt the sting of the hypo sliding into his arm and woke to see her face leaning over his, he hadn't the slightest idea she was back.