

The Death of Misery Chastain

Annie Wilkes read Paul Sheldon's new novel, *Fast Cars*, and she did not like it. The profanity bothered her. And Annie was dangerous when Annie was bothered. But her reading of *Misery's Child* was *so much worse*. For Misery Chastain – that ridiculous 19th century heroine – died at the end of the novel. And that death enraged Annie beyond the limit of self-control. Late at night, she stormed into Paul's room, trembling on the verge of god-knows what violence.

She just stood there, looking down at him out of her paper-white face, the cords on her neck standing out, one vein pulsing in the center of her forehead. Her hand snapped open, hooked shut into solid rock-like fists, then snapped open again.

'You . . . you . . . you dirty bird!'

'What I . . . I don't...'

But suddenly he did, and his entire midsection first seemed to turn hollow and then to entirely disappear. He remembered where her bookmark had been last night, three quarters of the way through. She had finished the book. She knew all there was to know.

'She can't be dead!' Annie Wilkes shrieked at him. Her hands snapped open and hooked closed in a faster and faster rhythm. 'Misery Chastain CANNOT BE DEAD!'

'Annie...Annie, please...'

'Dirty bird!' she panted. 'Oh you dirty birdie, how could you!'

He spoke rapidly, urgently, eyes flashing, riveted on her face. He was positive in that moment that his life might depend on what he was able to say in the next twenty seconds. 'Annie, in 1871 women frequently died in childbirth. Misery gave her life for her husband and her best friend and her child. The spirit of Misery will always - '

'I don't want her spirit!' she screamed, hooking her fingers into claws and shaking them at him, as if she would tear his eyes out. 'I want her! You killed her! You murdered her!' Her hands snapped shut

into fists again and she drove them down like pistons, one on either side of his head. They punched deep into the pillow and he bounced like a ragdoll.

His legs flared and he cried out, 'I didn't kill her!' he screamed.

She froze, staring at him with that narrow black expression - that look of crevasse. 'Of course not,' she said, bitterly sarcastic. 'And if you didn't, Paul Sheldon, who did?'

'No one,' he said more quietly. 'She just died.'

She came back a little at a time, and the anger, at least, was gone. She looked down at him sadly. 'I think I better go now. I don't think I better be around you for a while. I don't think it's . . . wise.'

'Go? Where?'

'It doesn't matter. A place I know. If I stay here, I'll do something unwise. I need to think. Goodbye, Paul.' She strode across the room.

'Will you be back to give me my medication?' he asked, alarmed.

She grasped the doorknob and pulled the door shut without answering. For the first time he heard the rattle of a key. He heard her footsteps going off down the hall. He winced as she cried out angrily - words he couldn't understand and something else fell and shattered. A door slammed. An engine cranked over and then started up. The low, crunching squeal of tires turning on packed snow. Now the motor-sound began to go away. It dwindled to a snore and then to a drone and was finally gone. He was alone. Alone in Annie Wilkes's house, locked in this room. Locked in this bed.

He thought of trying to get out of the bed, but the thought of the thump and the drop and the accompanying escalation of pain constantly deterred him. He dozed, woke, dozed. Day passed away. Night fell. He had to urinate. He began to believe she was dead. She was deeply unstable, and unstable people frequently took their own lives. If she was dead, he would die in here, a rat in a dry trap.

He kept thinking that unconsciousness would come and relieve him, but unconsciousness declined. Instead hour thirty came, and hour forty. Now the “King of Pain” and “Pretty thirsty” merged into one single mass (“I got the hungries” had been left in the dust long since.) And he began to feel like nothing more than a slice of living tissue on a microscope slide or a worm on a hook – something anyway twisting endlessly, and waiting only to die.

When she came in, he thought at first that she must be a dream, but then reality — or mere brute survival — took over and he began to moan and beg and plead, all of it broken, all of it coming from a deepening well of unreality. The one thing he saw clearly was that she was wearing a dark blue dress and a sprigged hat — it was exactly the sort of outfit he had imagined her wearing on the stand in Denver. Her color was high and her eyes sparkled with life and vivacity. She was as close to pretty as Annie Wilkes ever could be, and when he tried to remember that scene later, the only clear images he could fix upon were her flushed cheeks and the sprigged hat.

In her hand she held a glass of water — a tall glass of water. 'Take this,' she said, and put a hand still cool from the out-of-doors on the back of his neck so he could sit up enough to drink without choking. He took three fast mouthfuls, the pores on the arid plain of his tongue widening and clamoring at the shock of the water, some of it spilling down his chin and onto the tee-shirt he wore, and then she drew it away from him. He mewled for it, holding his shaking hands out. 'No,' she said. 'No, Paul. A little at a time, or you'll vomit.' After a bit she gave it back to him and allowed two more swallows.

'The stuff,' he said, coughing. He sucked at his lips and ran his tongue over them and then sucked his tongue. 'The capsules — pain — please, Annie, please, for God's sake please help me the pain is so bad — '

'I know it is, but you must listen to me,' she said, looking at him with that stern yet maternal expression. 'I had to get away and think. I have thought deeply, and I hope I've thought well. I was not entirely sure — my thoughts are often muddy, I know that. I accept that. It's why I couldn't remember where I was all those times they kept asking

me about. So I prayed. There *is* a God, you know, and He answers prayers. He always does. So I prayed. I said, "Dear God, Paul Sheldon may be dead when I get back." But God said, "He will not be. I have spared him, so you may shew him the way he must go."

She said shew as shoe, but Paul was barely hearing her anyway; his eyes were fixed on the glass of water. She gave him another three swallows. He slurped like a horse, burped, then cried out as shudder-cramps coursed through him.

During all of this she looked at him benignly. 'I will give you your medication and relieve your pain, she said, 'but first you have a job to do. I'll be right back.' She got up and headed for the door.

'No!' he screamed. She took no notice at all. He lay in bed, cocooned in pain, trying not to moan and moaning anyway. At first he thought he had lapsed into delirium. What he was seeing was too bizarre to be sane. When Annie returned, she was pushing a charcoal grill in front of her. 'Annie, I'm in terrible pain.' Tears coursed down his cheeks.

'I know, my dear.' She kissed his cheek, the touch of her' lips as gentle as the fall of a feather. 'Soon.'

She left, and he looked stupidly at the charcoal grill something meant for an outdoor summer patio which now stood in his room, calling up relentless images of idols and sacrifices. And sacrifice was what she had in mind, of course: when she came back she was carrying the manuscript of *Fast Cars*, the only existing result of his two years' work, in one hand. In the other she had a box of Diamond Blue Tip wooden matches.

'No,' he said, crying and shaking. One thought worked at him, burned in him like acid: for less than a hundred bucks he could have had the manuscript photocopied in Boulder Colorado. People — Bryce, both of his ex-wives, hell, even his mother — had always told him he was crazy not to make at least one copy of his work and put it aside; after all, the Boulderado hotel could catch on fire, or the New York townhouse; there might be a tornado or a flood or some other natural disaster. He had constantly refused, for no rational reason: it

was just that making copies seemed a jinx thing to do. Well, here was the jinx and the natural disaster all rolled up in one; here was Hurricane Annie. In her innocence it had apparently never even crossed her mind that there might be another copy of *Fast Cars* someplace, and if he had just listened, if he had just invested the lousy hundred dollars —

'Yes,' she replied, holding out the matches to him. The manuscript, clean white Hammermill Bond with the title page topmost, lay on her lap. Her face was clear and calm.

'No,' he said, turning his burning face away from her.

'Yes. It's filthy. That aside, it's also no good.'

'You wouldn't know good if it walked up and bit your nose off!' he yelled, not caring.

She laughed gently. Her temper had apparently gone on vacation. But, Paul thought, knowing Annie Wilkes, it could arrive back unexpectedly at any moment, bags in hand: Couldn't stand to stay away! How ya doin'?

'First of all,' she said, 'good would not bite my nose off. Evil might, but not good. Second of all, I do know good when I see it: you are good, Paul. All you need is a little help. Now, take the matches.'

He shook his head stiffly back and forth.

'No.'

'Yes.'

'No!'

'Yes.'

'No goddammit!'

'Use all the profanity you want. I've heard it all before.'

'I won't do it.' He closed his eyes. When he opened them, she was holding out a cardboard square with the word NOVRIL printed across the top in bright blue letters. SAMPLE, the red letters just

below the trade name read NOT TO BE DISPENSED WITHOUT PHYSICIAN'S PRESCRIPTION. Below the warning were four capsules in blister-packs. He grabbed.

She pulled the cardboard out of his reach. 'When you burn it,' she said. 'Then I'll give you the capsules — all four of these, I think — and the pain will go away. You will begin to feel serene again, and when you've got ahold of yourself, I will change your bedding — I see you've wet it, and it must be uncomfortable — and I'll also change you. By then you will be hungry and I can give you some soup. Perhaps some unbuttered toast. But until you burn it, Paul, I can do nothing. I'm sorry.'

His tongue wanted to say Yes! Yes, okay! and so he bit it. He rolled away from her again — away from the enticing, maddening cardboard square, the white capsules in their lozenge-shaped transparent blisters. 'You're the devil,' he said.

Again he expected rage and got the indulgent laugh, with its undertones of knowing sadness. 'Oh yes! Yes! That's what a child thinks when mommy comes into the kitchen and sees him playing with the cleaning fluid from under the sink. He doesn't say it *that* way, of course, because he doesn't have your education. He just says, "Mommy, you're mean!"' Her hand brushed his hair away from his hot brow. The fingers trailed down his cheek, across the side of his neck, and then squeezed his shoulder briefly, with compassion, before drawing away. 'The mother feels badly when her child says she's mean or if he cries for what's been taken away, as you are crying now. But she knows she's right, and so she does her duty. As I am doing mine.'

Three quick dull thumps as Annie dropped her knuckles on the manuscript — 190,000 words and five lives that a well and pain-free Paul Sheldon had cared deeply about, 190,000 words and five lives that he was finding more dispensable as each moment passed. The pills. The pills. He had to have the goddam pills. The lives were shadows. The pills were not. *They* were real.

'Paul?'

'No!' he sobbed. The faint rattle of the capsules in their blisters
Silence, then the woody shuffle of the matches in their box.

'Paul?'

'No!'

'I'm waiting, Paul.'

Oh why in Christ's name are you doing this asshole Horatio-at-the-bridge act and who in Christ's name are you trying to impress? Do you think this is a movie or a TV show and you are getting graded by some audience on your bravery? You can do what she wants or you can hold out. If you hold out you'll die, and then she'll burn the manuscript anyway. So what are you going to do, lie here and suffer for a book that would sell half as many copies as the least successful Misery book you ever wrote, and which Peter Prescott would shit upon in his finest genteel disparaging manner when he reviewed it for that great literary oracle, Newsweek? Come on, come on, wise up! Even Galileo recanted when he saw they really meant to go through with it!

'Paul? I'm waiting. I can wait all day. Although I rather suspect that you may go into a coma before too long; I believe you are in a near-comatose state now, and I have had a lot of . . . ' Her voice droned away.

'You burn it, then!' he yelled at her.

She turned and looked at him. 'No,' she said, 'I cannot do that, as much as I would like to and spare you the agony you feel.'

'Why not?'

'Because,' she said primly, 'you must do it of your own free will.'

He began to laugh then, and her face darkened for the first time since she had come back, and she left the room with the manuscript under her arm.

When she came back an hour later, he took the matches. She laid the title page on the grill. He tried to light one of the Blue Tips

and couldn't because it kept missing the rough strip or falling out of his hand. So Annie took the box and lit the match and put the lit match in his hand and he touched it to the corner of the paper and then let the match fall into the pot and watched, fascinated, as the flame tasted, then gulped. She had a barbecue fork with her this time, and when the page began to curl up, she poked it through the gaps in the grill.

'This is going to take forever,' he said. 'I can't — '

'No, we'll make quick work of it,' she said. 'But you must bum a few of the single pages, Paul — as a symbol of your understanding.' She now laid the first page of *Fast Cars* on the grill, words he remembered writing some twenty-four months ago, in the New York townhouse:

He looked at Annie Wilkes and said, clearly but not loud: 'Annie, please don't make me do this.'

She held the matches immovably before him and said: 'You can do as you choose.'

So he burned his book.

There was a brief spark — he had time to wonder if perhaps the room was going to catch on fire — that winked once and then went out, leaving a tiny hole like a cigarette burn. Ash sifted down on the bed. Some landed on his arms. He didn't really care, one way or the other. Annie came back, eyes trying to dart everywhere at once trying to trace the course of each carbonized page as it rose and seasawed.

Flames flipped and flickered over the edge the pot. 'Goodness!' she said again, holding the bucket of water and looking around, trying to decide where to throw it or it needed to be thrown at all. Her lips were trembling and wet with spit. As Paul watched, her tongue darted out and slicked them afresh. 'Goodness! Goodness!' It seemed to be all she could say. Even caught in the squeezing vise of his pain, Paul felt an instant of intense pleasure — this was what Annie Wilkes looked like when she was frightened. It was a look he could come to love. Another page wafted up, this one still running with little tendrils of low blue fire, and that decided her. With another 'Goodness!' she

carefully poured the bucket of water into the barbecue pot. There was a monstrous hissing and a plume of steam. The smell was wet and awful, charred and yet somehow creamy. When she left he managed to get up on his elbow one final time. He looked into the barbecue pot and saw something that looked like a charred lump of log floating in a brackish pond.

After a while, Annie Wilkes came back. Incredibly, she was humming. She sat him up and pushed capsules into his mouth. He swallowed them and lay back, thinking: *I'm going to kill her.*