

***The Book was finally completed - that MISERY  
novel that Paul so hated and Annie so loved.***

When it was done, he put the pen aside. He regarded his work for a moment. He felt as he always did when he finished a book — queerly empty, let down, aware that for each little success he had paid a toll of absurdity. He touched the pile of manuscript and smiled a little bit. His hand left the big pile of paper and stole to the single Marlboro she had put on the windowsill for him. In the ashtray was a book of matches, but there was only one match in it — all she had allowed him. One, however, should be enough. He could hear her moving around upstairs. That was good. He would have plenty of time to make his few little preparations, plenty of warning if she decided to come down before he was quite ready for her.

Here comes the real trick, Annie. Let's see if I can do it. Let's see — can I?

He bent over, ignoring the pain in his legs, and began to work the loose section of baseboard out with his fingers. He called for her five minutes later, and listened to her heavy, somehow toneless tread on the stairs. He had expected to feel terrified when things got to this point, and was relieved to find he felt quite calm. The room was filled with the reek of lighter fluid. It dripped steadily from one side of the board which lay across the arms of the wheelchair.

'Paul, are you really done?' she called down the length of hallway.

Paul looked at the pile of paper sitting on the board beside the hateful Royal typewriter. Lighter fluid soaked the stack. 'Well,' he called back, 'I did the best I could, Annie.'

'Wow! Oh, great! Gee, I can hardly believe it! After all this time! Just a minute! I'll get the champagne!'

'Fine!'

He heard her cross the kitchen linoleum, knowing where each squeak was going to come the instant before it did come. *I am hearing all these sounds for the last time*, he thought, and that brought a sense of wonder, and wonder broke the calm open like an egg. The fear was inside . . . but there was something else in there as well. He supposed it was the receding coast of Africa. The refrigerator door was opened, then banged shut. Here she came across the kitchen again; here she came.

He had not smoked the cigarette, of course; it still lay on the windowsill. It had been the match he wanted. That one single match. *What if it doesn't light when you strike it?* But it was far too late for such considerations. He reached over to the ashtray and picked up the matchbook. He tore out the single match. She was coming down the hallway now. Paul struck the match and, sure enough, it didn't light. Easy! Easy does it! He struck it again. Nothing. Easy . . . easy . . . He scratched it along the rough dark-brown strip on the back of the book a third time and a pale-yellow flame bloomed at the end of the paper stick.

'I just hope this — ' She stopped, the next word pulled back inside her - she sucked in breath.

Paul sat in his wheelchair behind a barricade of heaped paper and ancient Royal stenomongery. He had purposely turned the top sheet around so she could read this: MISERY'S RETURN By Paul Sheldon Above this sopping pile of paper Paul's swollen right hand hovered, and held between the thumb and first finger was a single burning match.

She stood in the doorway, holding a bottle of champagne wrapped in a strip of towelling. Her mouth dropped open. She closed it with a snap. 'Paul?' Cautiously. 'What are you doing?'

'It's done,' he said. 'And it's good, Annie. You were right. The best of the *Misery* books, and maybe the best thing I ever wrote, mongrel dog or not. Now I'm going to do a little trick with it. It's a good trick. I learned it from you.'

'Paul, no!' she screamed. Her voice was full of agony and understanding. Her hands flew out, the bottle of champagne dropping from them unheeded. It hit the floor and exploded like a torpedo. Curds of foam flew everywhere. 'No! No! PLEASE DON'T — '

'Too bad you'll never read it,' Paul said, and smiled at her. It was his first real smile in months, radiant and genuine. 'False modesty aside, I've got to say it was better than good. It was great, Annie.'

The match was guttering, printing its small heat on the tips of his fingers. He dropped it. For one terrible moment he thought it had gone out, and then pale-blue fire uncoiled across the title page with an audible sound — foomp! It ran down the sides, tasted the fluid that had pooled along the outer edge of the paper-pile, and shot up yellow.

'OH GOD NO!' Annie shrieked. 'NOT MISERY! NOT MISERY! NOT HER! NO! NO!' Now her face had begun to shimmer on the far side of the flames.

'Want to make a wish, Annie?' he shouted at her. 'Want to make a wish, you fucking goblin?'

'OH MY GOD OH PAUL WHAT ARE YOU DOOOOOING?' She stumbled forward, arms outstretched. Now the pile of paper was not just burning; it was blazing. The gray side of the Royal had begun to turn black. Lighter fluid had pooled under it and now pale-blue tongues of flame shot up between the keys. Paul could feel his face baking, the skin tightening.

'NOT MISERY!' she wailed. 'YOU CAN'T BURN MISERY, YOU COCKADOODIE BRAT, YOU CAN'T BURN MISERY!' And then she did exactly what he had almost known she would do. She seized the burning pile of paper and wheeled about, meaning to run to the bathroom with it, perhaps, and douse it in the tub.

When she turned Paul seized the Royal, unmindful of the blisters its hot right side was printing on his already swollen right hand. He lifted it over his head. Little blue fire drops still fell from its undercarriage. He paid them no more mind than he paid the flare of pain in his back as he strained something there. His face was an insane grimace of effort and concentration. He brought his arms forward and down, letting the typewriter fly out of his hands. It struck her squarely in the center of her wide solid back.

'HOO-OWWG!' It was not a scream but a vast, startled grunt. Annie was driven forward onto the floor with the burning stack of paper under her. Small bluish fires like spirit-lanterns dotted the surface of the board which had served as his desk.

Gasping, each breath smooth hot iron in his throat, Paul knocked it aside. He pushed himself up and tottered erect on his right foot. Annie was writhing and moaning. A lick of flame shot up through the gap between her left arm and the side of her body. She screamed. Paul could smell frying skin, burning fat. She rolled over, struggling to her knees. Most of the paper was on the floor now, either still burning or hissing to ruin in puddles of champagne, but Annie still held some, and it was still burning. Her cardigan sweater was burning, too. He saw green hooks of glass in her forearms. A larger shard poked out of her right cheek like the blade of a tomahawk.

'I'm going to kill you, you ... ' she said, and staggered toward him. She kneewalked three 'steps' toward him and then fell over the typewriter. She writhed and managed to turn over halfway.

Then Paul fell on her. He felt the sharp angles of the typewriter beneath her even through her body. She screamed like a cat, writhed like a cat, and tried to claw out from under him like a cat. The flames were going out around them but he could still feel savage heat coming off the twisting, heaving mound beneath him and knew that at least some of her sweater and brassiere must be cooked onto her body. He felt no sympathy at all. She tried to buck him off.

'Get off me!' He found a handful of hot, charry paper. 'Get off me!' He crumpled the paper, squeezing flames out between his fingers. He could smell her — cooked flesh, sweat, hate, madness. GET OFF ME!' she screamed, her mouth yawning wide, and he was suddenly looking into the dank red-lined pit of the goddess. 'GET OFF ME YOU COCKADOODIE BR — '

He stuffed paper, white bond and black charred onionskin, into that gaping, screaming mouth. Saw the blazing eyes suddenly widen even more, now with surprise and horror and fresh pain. 'Here's your book, Annie,' he panted, and his hand closed on more paper. This bunch was out, dripping wet, smelling sourly of spilt wine. She bucked and writhed under him.

He crumpled the wet paper with a convulsive closing jerk of his fist and slammed it into her mouth, driving the half-charred first bunch farther down. 'Here it is, Annie, how do you like it? It's a genuine first, it's the Annie Wilkes Edition, how do you like it? Eat it, Annie, suck on it, go on and eat it, be a Do-Bee and eat your book all up.' He slammed in a third wad, a fourth. The fifth was still burning; he put it out with the already blistered heel of his right hand as he stuffed it in.

Some weird muffled noise was coming out of her. She gave a tremendous jerk and this time Paul was thrown off. She struggled and flailed to her knees. Her hands clawed at her blackened throat, which had a hideously swelled look. Little was left of her sweater but the charred ring of the neck. The flesh of her belly and diaphragm bubbled with blisters. Champagne was dripping from the wad of paper, which protruded from her mouth. 'Mumpf! Mark! Mark!' Annie croaked. She got to her feet somehow, still clawing at her throat. Paul pushed himself backward, legs sticking untidily out in front of him, watching her warily. 'Harkoo? Dorg? Mumpf!' She took one step toward him. Two. Then she tripped over the typewriter again. As she fell this time her head twisted at an angle and he saw her eyes looking at him with an expression that was questioning and somehow terrible.

*What happened, Paul? I was bringing you champagne, wasn't I?*

The left side of her head connected with the edge of the mantelpiece and she went down like a loose sack of bricks, striking the floor in a vast tumble that shook the house.

Annie had fallen on the bulk of the burning paper; her body had put it out. It was a smoking black lump in the middle of the floor. The puddles of champagne had put out most of the individual pages. But two or three had wafted against the wall to the left of the door while still burning brightly, and the wallpaper was alight in spots . . . but burning with no real enthusiasm.

Paul crawled over to his bed, pulling himself on his elbows, and got hold of the coverlet. Then he worked his way over to the wall, pushing the shards of broken bottle out of his way with the sides of his hands as he went. He had strained his back. He had burned his right hand badly. His head

ached. His stomach roiled with the sick-sweet smell of burned meat. But he was free. The goddess was dead and he was free.

He began to crawl back toward the wheelchair. He was halfway there when Annie opened her eyes. Paul stared, unbelieving, as she got slowly to her knees. Paul himself was propped on his hands, legs trailing out behind him.

Blood sheeted down her face. 'Durd!' Annie cried through her throatful of paper. She began to crawl toward him, hands outstretched, flexing. 'Ooo durd!' Paul pulled himself around in a half-circle and began to crawl for the door. He could hear her behind him. And then, as he entered the zone of broken glass, he felt her hand close around his left ankle and squeeze his stump excruciatingly. He screamed.

'DIRT!' Annie cried triumphantly.

He looked over his shoulder. Her face was turning slowly purple, and seemed to be swelling. He realized she actually was turning into the Bourkas' idol. He yanked with all his might and his leg slithered footlessly out of her grasp, leaving her with nothing but the circlet of leather with which she had capped the stump. He crawled on, beginning to cry, sweat pouring down his cheeks. He pulled himself along on his elbows like a soldier advancing beneath heavy machine-gun fire. He heard the thud of first one knee from behind him, then the other, then the first again.

She was still coming. She was as solid as he had always feared. He had burned her broken her back stuffed her tubes full of paper and still still still she was coming.

'BIRT!' Annie screamed now. 'DIRT . . . BIRT!'

One of his elbows came down on a hook of glass and it jabbed up into his arm. He crawled forward anyway with it sticking out of him like a push-pin. Her hand closed over his left calf.

AW! GAW . . . OOO OW . . . AW!

He turned back again and yes, her face had gone black, a dusky rotted-plum black from which her bleeding eyes bulged wildly.

Die can't you die can't you ever die can't you —

'GA W . . . G — '

The pressure slackened. For a moment he could breathe again. Then Annie collapsed on top of him, a mountain of slack flesh, and he couldn't breathe at all. He worked his way out from under her like a man burrowing his way out of a snowshde. He did it with the last of his strength. He crawled through the door, expecting her hand to settle around his ankle again at any moment, but that did not happen. Annie lay silent and face-down in blood and spilled champagne and fragments of green glass.

Was she dead? She must be dead. Paul did not believe she was dead.

He slammed the door shut. The bolt she had put on looked like something halfway up a high cliff, but he clawed his way up to it, shot it, and then collapsed in a shuddery huddle at the door's foot. He lay in a stupor for some unknown length of time. What roused him from it was a low, minute scratching sound. *The rats*, he thought. *It's the r—*

Then Annie's thick, blood-grimed fingers poked under the door and tugged mindlessly at his shirt. He shrieked and jerked away from them, his left leg creaking with pain. He hammered at the fingers with his fist. Instead of pulling back, they jerked a little and lay still.

*Let that be the end of her. Please God let that be the end or her.*

In horrible pain now, Paul began to crawl slowly toward the bathroom. He got halfway there and looked back. Her fingers were still poking out from under the door. As bad as his pain was, he could not stand to look at that, or even think of that, and so he reversed direction, went back, and pushed them under. He had to nerve himself to do it; he was certain that the moment he touched them, they would clutch him.

He crawled slowly into the hall and looked back down toward the guest-room. It was shut, blank, and he began to crawl toward the parlor. It was a pit of shadows. Annie could be hidden in any of them; Annie could *be* any of them. And she could have the axe.

He crawled. There was the overstuffed sofa, and Annie was behind it. There was the kitchen door, standing open, and Annie was behind that. The floorboards creaked in back of him . . . of course! Annie was behind him! He turned, heart hammering, brains squeezing at his temples, and Annie was

there, all right, the axe upraised, but only for a second. She blew apart into shadows.

He crawled into the parlor and that was when he heard the drone of an approaching motor. A faint wash of headlights illuminated the window, brightened. He heard the tires skid in the dirt and understood they had seen the chain she had strung across the driveway. A car door opened and shut. 'Shit! Look at this!'

He crawled faster, looked out, and saw a silhouette approaching the house. The shape of the silhouette's hat was unmistakable. It was a state cop.

'Here!' Paul Sheldon cried deliriously. 'Here, in here, please, I'm in here!'

They had come with a search warrant. When they finally broke into the house in answer to the frenzied screams coming from the parlor, they found a man who looked like a nightmare sprung to life.

He drew his gun and the two of them started slowly down the hall to Paul's closed bedroom door. 'Watch out for her!' Paul shrieked in his cracked and broken voice. 'Be careful!'

They unlocked the door and went in. Paul pulled himself against the wall and leaned his head back, eyes closed. He was cold. He couldn't stop shivering. They would scream or she would scream. There might be a scuffle. There might be shots. He tried to prepare his mind for either. Time passed, and it seemed to be a very long time indeed. At last he heard booted feet coming back down the hall. He opened his eyes.

She was dead when Officers Wicks and McKnight found her, but not of strangulation. She had actually died of the fractured skull she had received when she struck the mantel, and she had struck the mantel because she had tripped. So in a way she had been killed by the very typewriter Paul had hated so much. But she'd had plans for him, all right. Not even the axe would suffice this time. They had found her outside of Misery the pig's stall, with one hand wrapped around the handle of her chainsaw. That was all in the past, though. Annie Wilkes was in her grave.

But like Misery Chastain, she rested there uneasily. In his dreams and waking fantasies, he dug her up again and again. You couldn't kill the goddess.

*The End*