

Misery

By Stephen King

When you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.

- Friederich Nietzsche

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These sounds: even in the haze.

But sometimes the sounds — like the pain — faded, and then there was only the haze. He remembered darkness; solid darkness had come before the haze. Did that mean he was making progress? Let there be light (even of the hazy variety), and the light was good, and so on and so on? Had those sounds existed in the darkness? He didn't know the answers to any of these questions. Did it make sense to ask them? He didn't know the answer to that one, either. The pain was somewhere below the sounds. The pain was east of the sun and south of his ears. That was all he did know.

For some length of time that seemed very long (and so was, since the pain and the stormy haze were the only two things which existed) those sounds were the only outer reality. He had no idea who he was or where he was and cared to know neither. He wished he was dead, but through the pain-soaked haze that filled his mind like a summer storm-cloud, he did not know he wished it.

His first really clear memory of this *now*, the now outside the storm-haze, was of stopping, of being suddenly aware he just couldn't pull another breath, and that was all right, that

was good, that was in fact just peachy-keen; he could take a certain level of pain but enough was enough and he was glad to be getting out of the game.

Then there was a mouth clamped over his, a mouth which was unmistakably a woman's mouth in spite of its hard spitless lips, and the wind from this woman's mouth blew into his own mouth and down his throat, puffing his lungs, and when the lips were pulled back he smelled his warder for the first time, smelled her on the outrush of the breath she had forced into him - the way a man might force a part of himself into an unwilling woman, a dreadful mixed stench of vanilla cookies and chocolate ice-cream and chicken gravy and peanut-butter fudge.

He heard a voice screaming, 'Breathe, goddammit! Breathe, Paul!'

The lips clamped down again. The breath blew down his throat again. Blew down it like the dank suck of wind which follows a fast subway train, pulling sheets of newspaper and candy wrappers after it, and the lips were withdrawal, and he thought *For Christ's sake don't let any of it out through your nose* - but he couldn't help it and oh that stink, that stink that fucking STINK.

'Breathe, goddam you!' the unseen voice shrieked, and he thought *I will, anything, please just don't do that anymore, don't infect me anymore*, and he tried, but before he could really get started her lips were clamped over his again, lips as dry and dead as strips of salted leather, and she raped him full of her air again.

When she took her lips away this time he did not let her breath out but pushed it and whooped in a gigantic breath of his own. Shoved it out. Waited for his unseen chest to go up again on its own, as it had been doing his whole life without any help from him. When it didn't, he gave another giant whooping gasp, and then he was breathing again on his own, and doing it as fast as he could to flush the smell and taste of her out of him.

Normal air had never tasted so fine.

He began to fade back into the haze again, but before the dimming world was gone entirely, he heard the woman's voice mutter: 'Whew! That was a close one!'

Not close enough, he thought, and fell asleep.

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But it was still a long time before he was finally able to break the dried scum of saliva that had glued his lips together and croak out 'Where am I?' to the woman who sat by his bed with a book in her hands. The name of the man who had written the book was Paul Sheldon. He recognized it as his own with no surprise.

'Sidewinder, Colorado,' she said when he was finally able to ask the question. 'My name is Annie Wilkes. And I am —'

'I know,' he said. 'You're my number-one fan.'

'Yes,' she said, smiling. 'That's just what I am.'

Darkness. Then the pain and the haze. Then the awareness that, although the pain was constant, it was sometimes buried by an uneasy compromise which he supposed was relief. The first real memory: stopping, and being raped back into life by the woman's stinking breath.

Next real memory: her fingers pushing something into his mouth at regular intervals, something like Contac capsules, only since there was no water they only sat in his mouth and when they melted there was an incredibly bitter taste that was a little like the taste of aspirin. It would have been good to spit that bitter taste out, but he knew better than to do it.

Outside things began to impinge more rapidly until the objective world, with all its freight of memory, experience, and prejudice, had pretty much re-established itself. He was Paul Sheldon, who wrote novels of two kinds, good ones and best-sellers. He had been married and divorced twice. He smoked too much (or had before all this, whatever 'all this' was). Something very bad had happened to him but he was still alive. That dark-gray cloud began to dissipate faster and faster. It would be yet awhile before his number-one fan brought him the old clacking Royal with the grinning gapped mouth and the Ducky Daddles voice, but Paul understood long before then that he was in a hell of a jam.

After awhile — after his alarm had become too great to be ignored — he was able to find out what she was feeding him. It was a pain-killer with a heavy codeine base called Novril. The reason she had to bring him the bedpan so infrequently was not only because he was on a diet consisting entirely of liquids and gelatines (earlier, when he was in the cloud, she had fed him intravenously), but also because Novril had a tendency to cause constipation in patients taking it. Another side effect, a rather more serious one, was respiratory depression in sensitive patients. Paul was not particularly sensitive, even though he had been a heavy smoker for nearly eighteen years, but his breathing had stopped nonetheless on at least one occasion (there might have been others, in the haze, that he did not remember). That was the time she gave him mouth-to-mouth. It might have just been one of those things which happened, but he later came to suspect she had nearly killed him with an accidental overdose. She didn't know as much about what she was doing as she believed she did. That was only one of the things about Annie that scared him.

He discovered three things almost simultaneously, about ten days after having emerged from the dark cloud. The first was that Annie Wilkes had a great deal of Novril (she had in fact, a great many drugs of all kinds). The second was that he was hooked on Novril. The third was that Annie Wilkes was dangerously crazy.

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The darkness had prologued the pain and the storm-cloud; he began to remember what had prologued the darkness as she told him what had happened to him. This was shortly after he had asked the traditional when-the-sleeper-wakes question, and she had told him he was in the little town of Sidewinder, Colorado. In addition, she told him that she had read each of his eight

novels at least twice, and had read her very favorites, the *Misery* novels, four, five, maybe six times. She only wished he would write them faster. She said she had hardly been able to believe that her patient was really that Paul Sheldon even after checking the ID in his wallet.

'Where is my wallet, by the way?' he asked.

'I've kept it safe for you,' she said. Her smile suddenly collapsed into a narrow watchfulness he didn't like much — it was like discovering a deep crevasse almost obscured by summer flowers in the midst of a smiling, jocund meadow. 'Did you think I'd steal something out of it?'

'No, of course not. It's just that — ' *It's just that the rest of my life is in it*, he thought. *My life outside this room*. Outside the pain. Outside the way time seems to stretch out like the long pink string of bubble-gum a kid pulls out of his mouth when he's bored. Because that's how it is in the last hour or so before the pills come.

'Just what, Mister Man?' she persisted, and he saw with alarm that the narrow look was growing blacker and blacker. The crevasse was spreading, as if an earthquake was going on behind her brow. He could hear the steady, keen whine of the wind outside, and he had a sudden image of her picking him up and throwing him over her solid shoulder, where he would lie like a burlap sack slung over a stone wall, and taking him outside, and heaving him into a snowdrift. He would freeze to death, but before he did, his legs would throb and scream.

'It's just that my father always told me to keep an eye on my wallet,' he said, astonished by how easily this lie came out. His father had made a career out of not noticing Paul any more than he absolutely had to, and had, so far as Paul could remember, offered him only a single piece of advice in his entire life. On Paul's fourteenth birthday his father had given him a Red Devil condom in a foil envelope. 'Put that in your wallet,' Roger Sheldon said, 'and if you ever get excited while you're making out at the drive-in, take a second between excited enough to want to and too excited to care and slip that on. Too many bastards in the world already, and I don't want to see you going in the Army at sixteen.'

Now Paul went on: 'I guess he told me to keep my eye on my wallet so many times that it's stuck inside for good. If I offended you, I'm truly sorry.'

She relaxed. Smiled. The crevasse closed. Summer flowers nodded cheerfully once again. He thought of pushing his hand through that smile and encountering nothing but flexible darkness.

'No offense taken. It's in a safe place. Wait — I've got something for you.'

She left and returned with a steaming bowl of soup. There were vegetables floating in it. He was not able to eat much but he ate more than he thought at first he could. She seemed pleased. It was while he ate the soup that she told him what had happened, and he remembered it all as she told him; and he supposed it was good to know how you happened to end up with your legs shattered; but the manner by which he was coming to this knowledge was disquieting — it

was as if he was a character in a story or a play, a character whose history is not recounted like history but created like fiction.

She had gone into Sidewinder in the four-wheel drive to get feed for the livestock and a few groceries . . . also to check out the paperbacks at Wilson's Drug Center — that had been the Wednesday that was almost two weeks ago now, and the new paperbacks always came in on Tuesday.

'I was actually thinking of you,' she said, spooning soup into his mouth and then professionally wiping away a dribble, from the corner with a napkin. 'That's what makes it such a remarkable coincidence, don't you see? I was hoping *Misery's Child* would finally be out in paperback, but no such luck.'

A storm had been on the way, she said, but until noon that day the weather forecasters had been confidently claiming it would veer south, toward New Mexico and the Sangre de Cristos mountains.

'Yes,' he said, remembering as he said it: 'They said it would turn. That's why I went in the first place.' He tried to shift his legs. The result was an awful bolt of pain, and he groaned.

'Don't do that,' she said. 'If you get those legs of yours talking, Paul, they won't shut up . . . and I can't give you any more pills for two hours. I'm giving you too much as it is.'

Why aren't I in the hospital? This was clearly the question that wanted asking, but he wasn't sure it was a question either of them wanted asked. Not yet, anyway.

'When I got to the feed store, Tony Roberts told me I better step on it if I was going to get back here before the storm hit, and I said —'

'How far are we from this town?' he asked.

'A ways,' she said vaguely, looking off toward the window. Then, slowly, her face cleared. Thoughts seemed to flow back into it.

'I said to Tony, "That storm is going south."'

She spoke slowly at first, almost groggily, but then her words began to catch up to normal cadence and to fill with normal conversational brightness. But now he was alerted. Everything she said was a little strange, a little offbeat. Listening to Annie was like listening to a song played in the wrong key.

'But he said, "It changed its mind." "Oh poop!" I said. "I better get on my horse and ride."

"I'd stay in town if you can, Miz Wilkes," he said. "Now they're saying on the radio that it's going to be a proper jeezer and nobody is prepared."

'But of course I had to get back — there's no one to feed the animals but me. The nearest people are the Roydmans, and they are miles from here. Besides, the Roydmans don't like me.' She cast an eye shrewdly on him as she said this last, and when he didn't reply she tapped the spoon against the rim of the bowl in peremptory fashion.

'Done?'

'Yes, I'm full, thanks. It was very good. Do you have a lot of livestock?' *Because*, he was already thinking, *if you do, that means you've got to have some help. A hired man, at least.* 'Help' was the operant word. Already that seemed like the operant word, and he had seen she wore no wedding ring.

'Not very much,' she said. 'Half a dozen laying hens. Two cows. And Misery.'

He blinked.

She laughed. 'You won't think I'm very nice, naming a sow after the brave and beautiful woman you made up. But that's her name, and I meant no disrespect.' After a moment's thought she added: 'She's very friendly.' The woman wrinkled up her nose and for a moment became a sow, even down to the few bristly whiskers that grew on her chin. She made a pig-sound:

'Whoink! Whoink! Whuh-Whuh-WHOINK!'

Paul looked at her wide-eyed.

She did not notice; she had gone away again, her gaze dim and musing. Her eyes held no reflection but the lamp on the bed-table, twice reflected, dwelling faintly in each. At last she gave a faint start and said: 'I got about five miles and then the snow started. It came fast — once it starts up here, it always does. I came creeping along, with my lights on, and then I saw your car off the road, overturned.' She looked at him disapprovingly. 'You didn't have your lights on.'

'It took me by surprise,' he said, remembering only at that moment how he had been taken by surprise. He did not yet remember that he had also been quite drunk.

'I stopped,' she said. 'If it had been on an upgrade, I might not have. Not very Christian, I know, but there were three inches on the road already, and even with a four-wheel drive you can't be sure of getting going again once you lose your forward motion. It's easier just to say to yourself, "Oh they probably got out, caught a ride," et cetera, et cetera. But it was on top of the third big hill past the Roydmans' and it's flat there for a while. So I pulled over, and as soon as I got out I heard groaning. That was you, Paul.' She gave him a strange maternal grin.

For the first time, clearly, the thought surfaced in Paul Sheldon's mind: *I am in trouble here. This woman is not right.*

