

*Traveling
Left of Center*

*and other stories
by Nancy Christie*

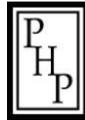
Traveling Left of Center and Other Stories

Nancy Christie

Annabelle by Nancy Christie

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Annabelle

“My father was a painter,” Annabelle had said—was it at the second session or the third?—“and my mother would pose for him.”

Annabelle remembered watching her father paint in the cold, clear light filtering into his studio. He used canvas and oils the way God had used clay, creating life from inanimate objects. The walls of the house were hung with his paintings—those his agent could not convince him to release—and everywhere Annabelle looked, her mother’s dark eyes would follow her, glowing on the canvas.

Sometimes, after a long session in the studio, her mother would be pale and weak, barely able to stand, so colorless that one would think her a ghost. The portraits, by contrast, were pulsing with life. Annabelle had feared that her father was drawing the very lifeblood from her mother, leaving behind an empty shell.

And yet, her mother gloried in the attention, willingly changing herself into any figure her husband desired, just to be able to stand there, caught by his passion, while he painted.

His work sold quite well in galleries across the country, but even if it had not, her

father would have continued to paint, and her mother to pose.

And Annabelle-the-child would be standing, somewhere just outside their line of sight, watching. And waiting.

“Did your father never paint *you*, Anna?” Jules’ question was spoken so softly in the darkened room that it almost seemed the words originated in Annabelle’s mind, and she answered them just to hear her own voice echoing in the darkness.

Annabelle blushed, an ugly red stain against her pale skin. “He did not paint children,” she answered hesitantly, not adding that once she had asked—begged!—her father to paint her.

She had been young, five or six, and perhaps a little jealous of the attention given her mother during those endless sessions in the studio. Just once, she wanted her father to look at her with the intensity he reserved for his wife—to fix her so clearly on the canvas that there was no possibility of her ceasing to exist.

The promises she had made—“I won’t move! I won’t even breathe if you would just paint me!”—were all in vain. Her father had looked at her absently, his brush suspended in mid-stroke, and Annabelle realized in that moment that he wasn’t at all certain who she was or why she was there in his studio.

Her mother, with gentle, insistent fingers, had urged her reluctant daughter from the room, promising “another time, darling. You’re too young to be a model for your father’s

art. He needs someone a little older, more knowledgeable. You are still unformed, innocent... too young. You must wait,” and then the door closed and Annabelle was left outside while her mother went back to pose for her husband.

Sometimes, when Annabelle remembered that moment, she almost hated her mother. She had wanted her chance, and her mother wouldn't let her have it. Perhaps she should have argued or cried. She didn't want to wait. She wanted her father to see her *now*.

But Annabelle was a good child, an obedient daughter. Her mother said she must wait. Therefore, she would wait. If not for her father, then someone else—some other man who would be drawn to her like a moth to a candle. It would happen. Her mother had promised.

“But when?” and she was unaware she had spoken aloud until she saw Jules' raised eyebrows and understood he had not been following her thoughts.

“When will it happen? My mother,” she explained awkwardly, twisting her hands together until the knuckles gleamed whitely in the lamplight, “my mother promised me a lover...someone like my father. She said I was beautiful, that men would follow me wherever I went. She used to call me her own ‘lovely Annabelle’.

“Sometimes she would lie with me and twist our long hair together into one long rope and you couldn't tell, not really, which was my mother's hair and which was mine. I was a

pretty child then...‘lovely Annabelle,’” and then she fell silent.

Lovely Annabelle she once was, but Anna was what she had become—the long curls cut short, the golden strands darkened and dirty-looking, the blue eyes washed to some indeterminate shade of gray.

There was no one left who remembered Annabelle, and no one who particularly cared about Anna. Although once, there had been a rose, sent by a man she hardly knew, who worked in the office next to hers.

“He brought me a rose,” she said to Jules, “this man I didn’t know. And I thought perhaps this was what my mother meant...that this flower would be the beginning of passion for me.”

It was a full-blown red rose, tears of moisture still trapped on paper-thin petals. He had laid it on her desk before she came into the office, and at first, she didn’t believe it was meant for her.

She lifted the stem, heavy with the weight of the blossom, and caressed her lips with the silken, scarlet petals. And deep inside her, a fire began to smolder, bringing an unaccustomed warmth and color to her pale cheeks.

“I put the rose in my water glass. I wanted it there, right in front of me, so I could see it while I worked”—typing endless meaningless reports about people she would never know.

All morning long, she typed, and while she worked, she cast furtive glances at the

flower, fearing it might disappear before her eyes.

It didn't, of course, but what did happen was, in its own way, infinitely worse. The petals began to curl and the color to fade (she had failed to add water to the glass—and was that omission accidental or intentional?) and by the end of the day, the rose had withered before her eyes—the promise of passion gone before she could respond to it.

“Did the man come to see you?” Jules asked, leaning forward to see her more clearly. But Annabelle avoided his eyes.

“I like this office,” she said instead. “It’s never very bright in here. Bright lights hurt my eyes. My father’s studio was bright... he said he needed light to see life more clearly. But sometimes it isn’t good to see too much. It can hurt you.”

But the light never hurt her father’s eyes. And when Annabelle’s mother was there, posing for one of the hundred—thousand!—pictures her father painted, the white light was shot through with color, as if her mother were a prism, capturing the clear beam and transforming it into all the colors of the rainbow.

“The man,” Jules persisted, and Annabelle frowned. Man? What man? Oh, the man with the rose—Annabelle never knew his name, and now couldn’t even recall his face or the color of his eyes or the shape of his mouth.

“He came by my desk as he was leaving,” she answered finally, snatches of the long-ago conversation drifting through her memory like falling leaves.

“The rose,” he had said hesitantly. “I hope you liked it. It’s called Illusion. It made me think of you.”

Annabelle looked again at the flower, but saw in its place the armfuls of roses her mother would gather from the bushes surrounding the house—the crimson petaled Avon, the dark red Traviata and, her mother’s favorite, the floribunda called Black Ice. She would slip the stems into her hair, thrust them deep into the neckline of her delicate silk gown, and then embrace her husband until the flowers were crushed and bleeding against her flesh.

The scent from those roses had filled the air, unlike this poor dead bloom, which had no scent, no life at all. Annabelle looked at the stranger—at his stooped shoulders and nails bitten to the quick—and couldn’t even imagine being embraced by him, enfolded by those thin arms or crushed against that bony chest.

He is not a man like my father, she thought, remembering her father’s muscular arms, covered with dark hairs curling with a life of their own. He is not a man at all, and in that moment, the stranger was lost.

“The flower died,” she had said finally to the waiting man. (And why did he stay? Did he think she would want him?) With one thin finger, she tapped the bloom, and some of the petals drifted free from the heart.

“You brought me a flower with no life at all,” and no longer seeing him, she methodically stripped off the rest of the petals.

It wasn't until there was a small pile of faded color in the center of her desk that she realized he had gone.

Then, almost unaware of what she was doing, she pressed one of the thorns—sharp even in death—against her fingertip, harder, harder, until a bubble of red appeared and fell onto the petals.

Annabelle wondered if someday she too would be so dried up that her blood would change like the color of the rose, from deep scarlet to a faded, brownish red.

“How could he say a dying flower reminded him of me?” she asked Jules angrily. “How dare he tempt me with passion, only to offer death in the end?”

Jules swiveled his chair away from the light on his desk, until he was nothing more than a darker shadow in the darkness.

“Did you ever talk to him again?”

Annabelle shook her head, almost amused by the question. Talk to him? Why should she? She never even saw him again—although she supposed in the days and weeks that followed he must have passed her desk half a hundred times.

But he had ceased to exist for her. Her vision was taken up searching for the lover who was yet to come.

“You know, Anna, I can't help you if you won't talk to me.” Jules' voice was sharp, cutting into her thoughts. “You want to be well again, don't you?”

“I was never sick,” she answered, obstinate as a child when confronted with an

unpleasant thought. “There’s nothing wrong with me. Just because I want what my mother promised me... a man like my father... my father....”

Her words drifted off for a moment but she regained control.

“Someday my lover will come for me.” *Someday my prince will come*—the words rose unbidden in her mind—from a fairy-tale perhaps? But her lover wasn’t a fairy tale prince or figment of her imagination. He was there, somewhere, waiting for her. She had only to be strong and hold on long enough and he would find her.

And when he came, she would never be alone again.

Her mother had found her lover—the only lover she had ever wanted or needed—and stayed with him, though the passion burned her very soul. Annabelle could be as strong as her mother, couldn’t she? Couldn’t she?

“I think perhaps we should end this session,” said Jules, setting down the gold-tipped pen with which he made notes each week. “There isn’t much we can accomplish if you won’t talk. You must face up to the reality of the past so you can you plan for your future. It is all very well to hope, Anna, to dream a little. But even dreams” (and did he really think she was listening to him?) “have to be grounded in reality.”

The small brass desk lamp threw his elongated shadow on the ivory walls. As the evening drew on, his shadow grew larger, more

powerful while his words drifted around Annabelle like snow in December, cold and smothering.

When Jules spoke so strongly, Annabelle was caught by his words, ensnared like a tiny bird by the movement of a deadly reptile. She couldn't move if she wanted to. Sometimes she would even find herself gasping for breath as though she had lost the ability to expand and contract her lungs.

Jules folded his hands—how strong they looked, clasped so firmly together—and fixed his eyes upon her.

Annabelle glanced at him and then away, the coldness of his gaze chilling her soul. Yet perversely, she wanted to stay here in his office, where the lights burned so softly. She was safe here. There was an air of timelessness, as though the world had stopped to allow her to catch her breath and find her strength.

And if Jules was cold to her—well, what of it? Her father had been cold; yet, when he focused that chilling, penetrating gaze on her mother, she ignited like a Roman candle, sparks shooting in every direction.

“I want to talk,” she protested, but Jules shook his head.

“Next week, Anna.” His words were less a promise than a price to be extracted from her—a pound of flesh each week until she was reduced to bone before his eyes. “When you come next week, we will talk together, you and I.

“I can help you, Anna,” and the persuasiveness of his tone pulled at her. “If you work

with me, we can uncover the truth. You want the truth, don't you, Anna?"

The truth—did she want the truth? What is truth? Pilate had asked, and whether he found the answer, no one ever said.

Annabelle knew the truth, but no one wanted to believe her. They would rather believe their own version of the past—an ugly, untrue, hurtful version. But Annabelle knew better. Annabelle could remember.

And there was enough time to recall the past, as she waited in her small empty room. It was so quiet—almost as quiet as it had been in her parents' house in the woods, where the silence was perfect and absolute. Even the blue jays knew better than to allow their raucous cries to disturb the peace required by her father and so jealously guarded by her mother.

Sometimes hours would go by with no one speaking at all, and when Annabelle finally used her voice, she would be surprised at the sound, as though she had forgotten what it was.

But color—the house had been filled with color. Metallic shades of gold and silver, deep pulsing reds and vibrant greens—every color known to man was captured by her father on large rectangles of white canvas.

And always, somewhere amidst the shades and hues, would be her mother, portraying whatever vision had seized her husband's mind. She would stand there—motionless, breathless, nearly lifeless—while the brush stroked bits of her onto the canvas.

Unmoving, until the vision released the artist, who, in turn, released his captive subject.

When Annabelle took her own apartment, she painted the walls and ceilings and floors white—stark white, bone white, the white of bleached driftwood tossed carelessly onto the shore after a storm.

And in the whiteness, she waited for someone to come, to bring all the colors of life alive through her.

“I couldn’t do what my father did,” she explained to Jules at the next session. “I couldn’t create life from color as he did. So I thought if I took the color away, it would make it easier for someone else to bring it all to life. To start with a fresh canvas—clean, white, unused.”

“You wanted to paint like your father?” Jules asked curiously. “Or did you just want to be like your father? He seems a driven man, not easy to live with. Was your mother happy, Anna, living with a man so obsessed by his art?”

Annabelle frowned. How could Jules understand the man her father had been? How could anyone understand the driving force that held him in its grasp, forcing him to blindly obey its every whim?

“When I was eight,” she answered obliquely, forehead creased with the effort of memory, “my mother found a young fox caught in a trap at the edge of the woods.”

Outside, the cold December sun gleamed fitfully through bare branches, but Annabelle felt again the warmth of a May morning and

saw the sunlight dancing in her mother's hair and on the reddish brown fur of the injured animal cradled in her arms.

"She brought it up to the house, trailing bits of leaves behind her, and she didn't even notice her dress was smeared with its blood. I think she was going to bandage its leg. It was bleeding quite steadily... cut to the bone by the sharp teeth of the steel trap. Or perhaps it had tried to gnaw itself free..." She closed her eyes for a moment as the agony of the trapped animal flooded through her. Trapped, with no means to escape except by inflicting more pain on an already bruised body.

Although sometimes, Annabelle thought, it was the only way.

"But just as she stepped through the French doors, my father saw her, and just as quickly wanted to paint her... the way my mother looked, carrying that poor suffering animal.

"It must have been near death by then. It didn't struggle, not even when my father twisted its head against my mother's breast and curled its bloodstained tail around her wrist.

"She stood there for nearly two hours, trapped in the act of entering her home just as the fox had been trapped, until my father was satisfied with what he had put on the canvas. Then he released her. But by then the fox had died... in my mother's arms, while she stood patiently as my father painted her.

“He sold that picture for quite a bit of money, I think.” Annabelle looked down at her hands, surprised to see she had been clenching them, surprised to see how wet they were with tears—why had she started to cry? It was only an animal after all, not nearly as important as her father’s art.

“What did your mother do with the fox?” Jules asked softly.

Annabelle wiped the tears from her hands. She mustn’t cry. She must not cry.

“She set it down on the loveseat in the corner,” and Annabelle-the-child watched with what grace and tenderness her mother placed the bloody, lifeless body on the soft white cushions.

“Then she went to my father, who was so absorbed in his work that he never even noticed the fox had died. He was like that, you know,” Annabelle explained, almost matter-of-factly. “When he was painting, nothing else mattered. It was just the way he was.” She wasn’t certain if she was explaining it to Jules, or the little girl and her mother, who both waited helplessly for his attention to leave the canvas.

“She pulled the neckline of her dress until the buttons released the fragile material and it fell like rain past her shoulders to the floor. My father looked up then. He saw my mother standing there, smears of blood on her shoulders and across her breast. Perhaps the fox had bit her in its agony.

“He ran his fingers lightly across the blood and then on the canvas, adding a touch of

dark red to the painting. And then," Annabelle looked blindly out the window, "he reached for my mother. He never even knew when I left the room, just as he never knew when the fox had died.

"But it didn't matter," she added, forcing the words past a throat curiously constricted with pain. "After all, she was his wife and loved him so. And the picture kept the fox alive in a way. Nothing else mattered. Nothing."

"How did you feel about your mother allowing the fox to die?"

Annabelle looked at Jules in surprise. Didn't he understand? Her father had to paint, and nothing could be allowed to interfere.

"She had no choice," she answered hesitantly. "My father needed her to stand there with the fox, and my mother...." Annabelle paused for a moment, searching for the right words to explain the strange symbiotic relationship that bound her parents, "my mother needed my father to need her. She would do anything, anything at all, for my father."

"Then why did she kill herself?" Jules swiveled in his chair until he was staring directly at Annabelle, forcing her to meet his eyes. Until now, he had been gentle, his words barely stroking her mind. He had a lover's touch—kind, persuasive.

But now, his rough words stripped away her memories, leaving her naked and defenseless in the cold light.

“She didn’t kill herself,” Annabelle answered mechanically, crossing her shivering arms in front of her chest.

It seemed as though she had been saying those words forever to a hundred different questioners. And none of them believed her. But she had to keep trying.

“We used to swim in that lake on warm summer evenings, my mother and I, while my father sat on the bank and painted her. And when she grew tired, she would float gently on the surface, her hair swirling in a golden cloud around her. My mother loved the water.”

“But it was night, Anna, dark and cold. Why would your mother choose to swim alone in a cold lake unless she wanted to die?”

Annabelle shook her head. It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true. The same words she had repeated to herself, from the safety of her bedroom, as she watched the stretcher carrying the slender wet figure. Only her mother’s hair was exposed, slipping from under the cover like a golden curtain to the ground. Poor dead drowned Ophelia, gone mad for love.

“It was a mistake. My mother would never have left my father. They needed each other....” She struck the arm of the chair for emphasis.

Jules was silent but she knew that he, like all the others, didn’t believe her. But Annabelle understood the truth. For whatever reason, her mother had left the house, and, once outside, was forever prevented from returning, leaving behind a grieving child and an artist with no subject, no release.

“It was a mistake, an accident. She would not have left him. It was nobody’s fault,” but the last words were spoken without conviction.

Annabelle moved then, as though her body had just awakened from an unrestful sleep.

“I can’t stay,” buttoning her coat, pulling on gloves. The dangers outside were preferable to those that awaited her here in the darkness. Too many questions, leading to doors that must remain closed—deep holes from which she could never escape—snares to twist her until she was caught forever.

It would be safer in her apartment, safer still in the house by the lake. Nothing could harm her there. If only she could escape.

January came, and with it, the first snowfall of the new year, soft and almost warm. Jules sat quietly for a time, and together they watched the snow drift down.

“It must have been difficult for you afterward. The house would be so empty with your mother gone,” Jules observed finally, and Annabelle understood her respite was over. They would begin again. “You went away to school some weeks later, didn’t you? Was it hard for you to leave your father? Did you miss him?”

Annabelle sat silently, watching the white flakes spin out of control. With her mother’s death, what balance there had been to their lives was lost. Her father locked himself in the studio for days afterward, painting.

And Annabelle drifted through the house, tall at thirteen, with the long golden hair so like her mother's. She would spend hours in her mother's bedroom, wrapping the familiar nightgowns and robes around her slender body, and look into the mirror, trying to find her mother's face in the glass.

It was two weeks later when her father emerged from his self-imposed isolation, and intent on the canvas he held, strode into his wife's room, only to find Annabelle seated at the dressing table, her mother's favorite red velvet robe pulled tightly around her.

For a moment, he stared in bewilderment, and then the familiar absorbed look came over his face as he studied the figure before him—the golden hair, the child's body, a woman's face.

And Annabelle, who had seen that look a thousand times before—and every time but once it had been directed at her mother—felt a curious mixture of fear and anticipation.

His fingers tightened on the paintbrush he still carried, and Annabelle knew he wanted to paint her—just her—and wouldn't rest until he did.

"I was afraid," she whispered now softly. "I knew what he wanted. But I couldn't... not again."

Her mother would have gone to the studio, Annabelle knew, and stood patiently while her husband tore bits of her free to lay on the canvas. But Annabelle was a child, not a woman, and the look in his eyes frightened her.

“I was not like my mother.” The despair in her voice echoed in the room. How could she ever think she could be like her mother—inspire the kind of life and love and passion her mother had? She was a coward, poor weak Annabelle, so she ran away—away to school, leaving her father.

“Did you miss him, Anna?” Jules asked again.

After her mother’s death, her father traveled to Europe, where he painted pictures of mountains and lakes. But never people. Her father painted no more pictures of people—of women—of his wife.

“When he died, Anna, how did you feel?”

The room was cold, and Annabelle shivered. It was like a scene from a courtroom drama—a murder trial perhaps. *Where were you when the victim died? How did you feel—were you lost, grieving? Did you feel free?*

“I was alone in my apartment. My father’s agent called, telling me of the plane crash...that my father had died.” She stumbled a bit over the words, the way she had stumbled as she turned from the phone after resting it carefully in its cradle. The man’s words, cut off in mid-sentence, echoed in the apartment: *“Dead. Dead.”*

The phone had rung again, the shrillness shattering the silence. But Annabelle wouldn’t answer it—not again. Not ever again. He wasn’t coming home. She wouldn’t have another chance.

“What did you do then?”

Annabelle frowned with the effort of remembering. What had she done? It seemed so long ago, although less than six months had passed. Late summertime it had been, and the leaves were just beginning to lose their fresh look as they died, cell by cell, on the trees.

Now it was the holiday decorations that were fading, and the snow, so clean and white, would soon be a dirty shroud on the city.

“Anna?”

She closed her eyes, unconsciously running the fingers of her right hand over the scar above her left wrist.

“I went into the kitchen and washed the cup I had used for coffee.” And the pot and the silverware, and finally, every dish that lined the otherwise empty cabinet.

“I always clean up after myself. I don’t like leaving messes for other people.” Her mother had left a mess—wet blankets dripping, a nightdress that, scrub as she would, Annabelle could never seem to make clean again.

A child, broken in pieces, never again to be whole.

But then, rules weren’t made for people like her parents.

“And then?”

“I wanted a bath. I went into the bathroom and took off all my clothes so I could take a bath.” She had blocked the overflow outlet and when she finally lowered her thin naked body into the tub, some of the water cascaded onto the tile floor.

“I was so cold.” She remembered the coldness—the coldness of death. Her mother had left her; now her father was gone. And they had taken their world away with them, leaving her to stand out there alone, waiting. Watching. Wanting.

She had lain in the tub, inching her way down the porcelain interior until her knees were sticking out of the water, and her head was almost level with the surface, with her hair floating around her, the way her mother’s had. Looking down, all she could see were her bony knees and the poor shriveled tips of her breasts, while all the rest of her body lay hidden.

It was peaceful and warm, and when she heard the phone, she turned the faucet on faster so the flow would drown its insistent ring, not caring that the water level had reached the top and was, even now, steadily trickling over the edge.

That was what had brought the landlady up two flights of stairs to Annabelle’s door. The water had leaked through the floorboards to the apartment below.

When the knocking came, it was easy for Annabelle to disregard it. Her world was peaceful, calm. Nothing mattered anymore. The lake was warm.

“What did you do?” Jules’ voice, soft, barely penetrated her consciousness.

“I just wanted to be left alone,” she said. “I didn’t want to see anyone. But they wouldn’t leave me alone,” and she didn’t even try to ex-

plain who “they” were or why they would bother her.

“So you took the razor,” Jules prompted, watching her narrowly through half-closed lids.

He looks like a lizard, Annabelle thought dreamily, waiting to flick his tongue to catch his dinner.

But he won’t catch me! she thought triumphantly, and suddenly, sat up straight.

“It was my tub, after all!” she shouted. “My water! My apartment! My razor, my skin, my life! What right did anyone have to take it from me?” and the tears came, great tearing sobs pulling at her lungs until she was gasping for breath.

“She had no right....”

Annabelle had screamed at the landlady, who had used her passkey to open the door, only to find a tub full of rose-colored water. “No right! You have no right to come in here!” Words unheard, for the energy to change thought into sound had seeped from her as steadily as the blood had seeped from her veins.

“I wasn’t her child! I wasn’t anybody’s child... not any more!” and the sobs stopped as suddenly as they had begun, as Annabelle’s words echoed in the room.

“Why did he leave me? I was ready. I wasn’t afraid,” and the words opened doors long closed.

She was thirteen, and had gone into her father’s studio fresh from the lake, with only a towel wrapped around her swimsuit-clad body.

Her father was painting yet another portrait of her mother.

“He always painted my mother. Oh, there were other things in the scene as well... animals, trees, the lake with the sun glancing off its surface to dazzle your eyes. But my mother was always there, irresistibly drawing your attention.

“I don’t know what it was about my father’s paintings that made her seem so alive. He’d been painting her for years, and she always looked the same... flaming eyes, golden hair, slender body....”

Annabelle’s voice trailed off as she saw again the endless succession of pictures her father had created—some with her mother clothed in styles from long ago, some of her naked body gleaming like ivory, like bones.

Her father was in love with her mother’s body—that much Annabelle-the-adult understood even if the child had been unable to perceive it at the time.

But was he in love with his wife?

“I never thought I would be as beautiful as my mother, even though she promised me my time would come. I grew taller, of course”—tall enough to reach first her mother’s shoulders, and then look into her eyes—“but to look like her seemed impossible. Still, our hair was the same, and I wore it long and loose like hers. I hoped I would look like her when I grew up.”

But she hadn’t. Something had gone wrong, it seemed, in those years after her mother’s death. Like a plant denied the life-

giving warmth of the sun, Annabelle had faded, her early promise just a bitter memory.

She got up from the office couch and walked to the small mirror hanging near the coat rack. The light in the room was dim but adequate, and Annabelle could see in the reflection the way her hair, now short and straight, failed to capture even a bit of glow from the lamp.

She ran her fingers impatiently through the strands, unsurprised to feel the brittleness of the ends. Like the hair on a corpse, she thought, and gathered a handful tightly back from her face. The skin pulled across her cheekbones, and it was a death's-head that stared back at her from the mirror.

"I'm not beautiful like my mother," she said aloud. "I never was, even at thirteen. He was wrong, you know," she added, turning back to Jules. "I wasn't ready, not then."

"Who was wrong, Anna?" Jules asked, but her eyes were caught by the past, and she didn't see the desk and lamp and psychiatrist. There was only the sunlight and her father, and the empty canvas he had placed on the easel.

"Something different this time," he had murmured, and began to sketch a waterfall, diamond flashes glittering on the whiteness. "Take off your suit," he added without turning, and Annabelle understood that he wanted to paint her, Annabelle, not her mother.

How long she had dreamed of her father wanting to paint her!—and yet, now that the time had come, she resisted, fearing the

moment when he would turn his life-draining gaze on her, reducing her to a mix of colors and shapes on the canvas.

But her father had to paint. Who was she to resist him?

It never seemed to bother her mother to undress in the studio, even though the air swirling through the French windows was cool. Her father liked to work in fresh air. He claimed it made the pictures sharper in his mind, but all Annabelle could think was how hard it must have been for her mother to stand in that chilly room for hours at a time, sometimes with nothing on at all to protect her body from the coldness.

This time, it was Annabelle whose flesh crawled with goose bumps, in spite of the flush of embarrassment that suffused her skin. She had never before been naked in front of her father, and now, with her woman's body beginning to emerge from the childish curves of fat and flesh, she felt exposed. Unprotected. Unready for the close scrutiny her father gave her.

Yet, hidden in the back corners of her mind was the spark of satisfaction that this time, it was *her* body her father wanted to paint—that it would be *her* face and eyes he would be capturing.

The spark grew, fanned to a flame each time her father's eyes raked over her. Gradually the chill left her body; she began to perspire, just lightly, a gentle moisture gathering under the hair lying on the back of her

neck and beneath the soft curve of her barely formed breasts.

And she stood there, relaxing under his regard like a cat satiated by the rays of the sun.

“Turn a bit,” he had commanded, but then, too impatient to wait, he adjusted her body himself, his hand lightly grazing the side of her neck. Annabelle flamed at his touch, desire bringing color to her cheeks. Unconsciously, she pulled her abdomen in a bit more and arched her narrow child’s back to allow more light to stream across her chest.

And the pose, at first so foreign and uncomfortable, became easier to maintain, as long as she looked into his eyes and saw herself as he did.

“Beautiful,” she heard him say. For that alone she would have endured a thousand hours of the same pose. He picked up the brush and swirled the soft bristles in the oil before stroking it slowly on the canvas, and Annabelle imagined she could feel the silken tip caressing her skin.

Her father worked in silence, pausing every now and then to look at Annabelle before returning his gaze to the canvas. And each time she met his eyes, there was an exchange of the fire that once had existed only between her parents.

When he pulled her hair forward, his fingers brushed against her breasts, and the force of her feelings were almost more than she could bear. She wanted to move, just a little, toward him—but he had told her to stand still.

Ever-obedient, she stood, though the fire threatened to consume her.

That was how her mother found them, just the two of them, the artist and his model.

“Anna? What are you thinking about, Anna?”

Annabelle looked at Jules blankly, not seeing him, but automatically answering his question, the question she thought she heard.

“It wasn’t my idea.” Was she answering Jules or defending herself against some unspoken accusation? “He said he needed a different model... someone pure and fresh and untouched...”

Her voice trailed off into the darkness, one hand covering her face, as though to hide behind the thin, splayed fingers. And she could still see the picture her father was painting—a waterfall and half-hidden in the water, the figure of a young girl, with her long hair modestly covering her nakedness.

The rest of the painting was unfinished, incomplete—like the young model posing for it. But in the eyes her father had captured some essence of forbidden knowledge that belied the child-like body, hinting at the woman waiting behind half-closed lids.

“My mother just stood there and watched him for a time... it seemed like hours, forever...” Forever, before her father stilled his brush and looked absently at his wife, as though she wasn’t there, not really—as though all that mattered was Annabelle.

The look caught her mother with the force of a blow, stripped the skin from her face and left the nerve ends quivering with the pain of rejection.

“It wasn’t my idea,” she said again to Jules.

And yet, Annabelle had gone into the studio when he was alone. She had stood there, in her thin bathing suit, willing him to see her.

But not for the world would she have hurt her mother.

“She was right for this picture,” her father said finally, looking at Annabelle critically before applying the faintest caress of soft brown to the undercurve of the belly of the painted Annabelle. “Young and tender... too young for you to model.”

Annabelle still believed he never intended to be cruel, only honest.

“I think,” he added, peering dispassionately at the canvas before gazing up at Annabelle’s mother, “this may be the beginning of a whole new series.”

There was silence in the room after that, except for the gentle stroking of the brush against the canvas and the uneven breathing of Annabelle’s mother.

And Annabelle, barely breathing, was still as a statue—cold now and ashamed, wanting only to hide her nakedness and return to the safety of a world where she could watch her parents twist and turn against their need for each other.

Perhaps her mother had understood, and forgiven Annabelle the part she had played, all

unknowing. She saw the painter engrossed in his work and the fresh child's body capturing his attention, and silently left the room. After all, nothing should interrupt his work. That was all that mattered.

The draft from the open windows raked across Annabelle's unprotected back. She trembled uncontrollably until her father threw down his brush in disgust.

"I can't paint if you won't stand still! Leave. We will finish it tomorrow," he said angrily, before turning to stare moodily out the window.

Annabelle ran from the studio to her room where she sat at her window and watched her mother swimming in the cold lake. With every stroke her mother took, with every wave that broke across her mother's back, Annabelle shivered in sympathy.

And the fire that had burned so unbearably within her was reduced to ashes.

Annabelle had fallen asleep at the window, her forehead resting on the glass. It wasn't until the next morning that she understood the full extent of her mother's love for her father.

"She left him that quickly," Annabelle said now to Jules, "because of me, and then I left him too. I was afraid.

"But I thought that, when I was older, when I saw him again... I didn't want to let him down. My mother wouldn't have... she was strong. I would be strong, too."

“Anna, it’s over now. It was wrong of your father to paint you, wrong of your mother to take her own life....”

But Annabelle stopped Jules, throwing up her hands as though to ward off the words, the accusations, the implication. “How can you say that? All that mattered was my father’s art! My mother died for him!”

And Annabelle was caught between the two of them, ripped apart. Bleeding. Dying.

“Anna,” Jules started, but she was lost to him, to the unbearable present. She caught up her coat and vanished through the office door, wanting only to reach her apartment, to find her past, to make her peace.

“I never meant to hurt you, Mother.” The words echoed in the empty rooms, although she couldn’t remember walking home or unlocking the door.

“I just wanted him to look at me for once. I just wanted someone to want me,” and she shook her head slowly as she saw herself reflected in the window.

How could she have ever thought she was as beautiful as her mother? She was ugly, and tearing off her clothes, she saw the shriveled skin across her chest, the dull hair hanging limply about her head, the eyes, large and staring and devoid of life.

“If my father saw me now, he wouldn’t want to paint me,” and there was relief in the thought. If they were all together again in the house by the lake, nothing could go wrong. Her father would paint only her mother, and Annabelle could stay safely in the background.

“Mother?” Her voice was uncertain in the darkness. Where had her mother gone? Why had she left her now just when Annabelle needed her most? She was just a child after all—a good child—an obedient child who was only doing what she had been told.

“It was all a mistake,” she said loudly, hoping her mother would hear her, out where she was swimming in the lake.

Annabelle stepped closer to the window, wanting to catch her mother’s eye. But perhaps she was too high up—on the third floor of the apartment building—the second story of the house by the lake, watching her mother swim with strong sure strokes through the sparkling water.

She undid the latch, and the cold winter wind gusted in, but Annabelle didn’t shiver. Why should she? It was June and the sun was shining and there was her mother, far out on the lake, and her father, carrying his easel down to the shore.

He was going to paint her mother as she floated on the water, and Annabelle could watch from the safety of her bedroom window.

“Annabelle! Annabelle!”

Her mother’s voice called to her, warm and loving and full of forgiveness. And her up-raised arm glittered with drops of water in the sunlight.

“I don’t want to be alone up here,” Annabelle said aloud, slipping her hand through her hair, feeling with the fingers of memory each golden curling strand. And then,

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with one final movement, she shook her long hair across her shoulders before running to them.

END

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Addenda

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The stories in this collection were not methodically planned out but rather, came unbidden and when least expected.

Something would trigger the idea—an overheard bit of conversation, an interaction between two strangers, an item left behind when no longer wanted or needed—and my writer's mind would seize on it, layering words around it the way an oyster secretes nacre around a bit of grit.

In the oyster's case, that coating serves to protect the mollusk's soft inside from any further discomfort. In *my* case, words serve the same purpose. The story trigger is the irritant, and I have learned that I have to do *something* with it or continue to be aggravated by it.

Not being a patient, long-suffering person, I chose to write, hoping to produce pearls, or at least, something better than the grit that started it all.

ABOUT NANCY CHRISTIE

Nancy Christie has a passion for fiction, and has been making up stories since she was a child, engaging in "what if" and "let's pretend" activities that took her far beyond her northeastern Ohio home.

Her short stories have appeared in literary magazines and on websites, including *Hypertext*, *Full of Crow*, *Fiction365*, *Red Fez*, *Wanderings*, *The Chaffin Journal* and *Xtreme*, with two available in e-book format from PHP Shorts: *Annabelle* and *Alice in Wonderland*.

She writes fiction because "I love the world of make-believe. I love learning about my characters, following them as they live their lives, rejoicing with them when things go well and commiserating with them when life becomes painful and events are almost unendurable. Crazy? Maybe. But you have to be a little crazy to spend your days and nights with people only you can see and hear."

For more information about Nancy Christie and her work, visit her website at www.nancychristie.com, read her writing blogs (One on One, The Writer's Place and Finding Fran) or follow her on Twitter at [@NChristie OH](https://twitter.com/NChristie_OH).

ABOUT PIXEL HALL PRESS

Pixel Hall Press is a relatively new, old-fashioned small publishing house that focuses on discovering literary gems and great stories that might have otherwise been overlooked.

Addenda

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