

KIRKWOOD

A series of short stories

THE ACTRESS

“You will be eaten”.

“What did you say?” Annabelle asked as she stood in front of the audition assistant.

“Let’s start again” the assistant replied, her voice pitched and exasperated. “Pull it back. Less theatrical. This is single camera not Broadway.”

“Ok. ” Annabelle answered trying to gather herself.

The assistant began the reading while simultaneously checking her phone. Annabelle missed her line a second time, distracted by this feat of multi-tasking.

“You do know what a single camera show is don’t you?”

“Of course. Can we try it once more?”

The assistant rolled her eyes and started again. This time, Annabelle focused and nailed her copy.

“Good. We’ll be in touch.”

Annabelle nodded, pleased with herself and walked through the cramped audition room toward the exit. She let her eyes wander to the audition list to see if there were any marks by her name indicating a possible call back. Nothing. But then again, there didn’t seem to be any marks next to anyone’s name so there was hope. Annabelle pulled on the door to go out.

“Your going to taste good.”

“Excuse me?”

“I didn’t say anything” the assistant replied, not looking up from her phone.

“I could have sworn someone spoke to me.”

“Could you send in the next person please?”

Annabelle left and a nervous looking Buffy the Vampire type squeezed past her . She looked down at her watch. 4pm. Shit. The audition had gone long and put her into rush hour traffic. She was in Santa Monica and had to make it back into West Hollywood for acting class. There wouldn't be enough time to go to her apartment, change and grab a protein bar.

"This is why your here" she said out-loud to herself as she fished through her purse for keys and a stick of gum. God, she was hungry. She'd forgotten to eat lunch and now she was looking down the barrel of two hours of traffic. Maybe there was a Starbucks nearby? Annabelle looked up and down the street.

"Of course, a million Starbucks in Santa Monica and my audition just had to be in the area where there are none". The gum would have to do. As she got closer to her car, Annabelle noticed the bright red corner of a ticket sticking out from her windshield.

"What the hell?"

She pulled it off of the windshield and checked the meter. There was still plenty of time and her stickers were all up to date. It read: "Parked outside of designated lines" \$65 fine". Annabelle looked down at her back tires and noticed they were about three inches over the line.

"Come On!" she yelled.

This town was not going to break her.

She stuffed the ticket into her purse and got in the car. Annabelle sat for a moment to relish the quiet the insulated car brought. She lay her head against the steering wheel and felt the rush of fatigue from the past six months since moving to L.A.. She wanted to sleep right then and there knowing it would be a deep and restful sleep unlike the last few months. It was always something. Coffee in her system, running lines in her head or worrying about getting her shifts covered for auditions. She needed something to hit soon. Her savings were dwindling. Annabelle let her eyes close. Traffic would be bad whether she left now or after a nap. There was still forty minutes left on the parking meter so she let go, slipping into sleep.

"We are waiting for you." A voice whispered in her ear.

She startled wide awake, whipping around looking for the source. Nothing was there. A car horn blared outside the window and Annabelle turned to see a white Mercedes pulled up next to her. A young lady yelled at her through the open passengers side window.

"Are you leaving or not?"

"Sorry" Annabelle replied.

The lady impatiently laid on the horn again. Annabelle jumped dropping her keys onto the floor under her seat. She reached down to retrieve them when something leathery and alive brushed against her knuckles. She screamed and jumped out of the car in a panic. The lady in the Mercedes looked like she was going to explode.

"What the hell?!"

“One second” Annabelle shot back leaning down to look beneath her seat.

“Fuck You!” Mrs. Mercedes roared her engine and darted forward. She came so close that Annabelle could feel the Mercedes door brush her shirt and the heat of the underside of the car.

“Good riddance.” Annabelle muttered as she checked around. Nothing under her seat and nothing under the back seats either. Strange. Maybe she did need some food. Annabelle rummaged around the back of the car and came up with a half filled bag of Cheetos. She popped one into her mouth. Chewy but still had that salty cheese sting that made her taste buds squeal in delight. It would be enough to get her home.

The commute took two and one half hours. As she crawled along the 405 freeway toward the 101, Annabelle listened to the radio switching from NPR to classic rock. The sun was setting and she marveled at the California light. The golden hour they called it. She loved looking up at the Hollywood Hills bathed in that light. Seeing the Spanish style mansions and bursts of palm trees as they watched over the glistening city. Artists in one capacity or another owned those homes. Artists like her who had “made it”. Who were working and getting paid for doing what they wanted to be doing. She would be one of those artists. She just knew it.

Not like her parents back in Aster, Virginia. Her mother worked for Kmart and her father was a plumber. They were decent and hard working and seemed happy enough but Annabelle could see it in their eyes. A look of desperation like trapped animals in the zoo. Once, she’d stumbled across a box of nature photographs her mother had taken before Annabelle was born.

“Why didn’t you pursue photography?” She’d asked her.

“It was just a hobby of mine. Besides, there’s not much of a call for nature photographers here in Aster.”

“You could have moved somewhere, anywhere but here” Annabelle replied.

“Your father’s business was here and we had you to raise. I couldn’t go off taking pictures wherever and whenever I wanted. I figured photography would always be there for me when I got more time.” She reached out and patted Annabelle’s cheek. “I’m good for now honey. Don’t worry about me. You just worry about what you want to do.”

It wasn’t long after that Annabelle announced to her parents she wanted to be a professional actress. Their eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“You shouldn’t be shocked.” She’d told them. “I’ve been in every play since grammar school.”

“There’s a big difference between plays here in Aster and Hollywood.” Her father said.

“The best thing you can do is arm yourself with knowledge” her mother chimed in. “Our condition is you go to college, then make your decision there.”

Annabelle didn’t disagree but her family could only afford community college. She excelled in every program they had about acting but there hadn’t been much. It was a small college with

little resources about the industry of film and television. Annabelle leaned on a few friends, who knew friends who lived in Los Angeles to get information about acting classes and apartments. They'd even provided some names of agents but explained that it would be a slim chance for her to get representation without having any work under her belt. Annabelle understood and was willing to scrap when she got to LA. She saved two years worth of summer job salary and her parents gave her what they could. The day that Annabelle was set to leave, her parents sat her down for a talk.

"In places like Hollywood" her father began, "there are great successes and great failures. Everything is amplified. Hollywood dangles dreams in front of peoples faces. It dangles what people most desire, making them willing to do almost anything to get it."

"I thought following my dreams was a good thing?" Annabelle replied confused.

"It is" her mother jumped in. "And you must go and pursue those dreams. But what your father is talking about is something different. It's a kind of obsession that can consume you so completely you forget everything. Yourself, us and the world."

"Is this a religious thing?" She replied defensively.

"You have to be able to let go" her father said deadly serious. "If you don't, you'll loose everything. Do you understand, Annabelle."

Her parents looked at her intently. Annabelle nodded yes but she lied. She didn't know what they were talking about. It simply sounded like scared, small town talk to her.

To be honest, Annabelle's first three months in Los Angeles had felt impossible. The noise, the pace, the intensity of everything was utterly overwhelming. She gradually acclimated. She got a job waiting tables at a busy lunch spot on the west side. She scored a cute little room for rent in a converted garage at the base of the Hollywood Hills. The rent was ridiculous. Twelve hundred dollars a month but the location was perfect. The building backed up against the sloping hill and apart from an occasional raccoon or skinny coyote loping by, it was quiet.

Today, Annabelle was looking forward to crashing back at her little room. Acting class had gone late and she was woefully underprepared for her scene which didn't go over well with the teacher. She pulled into her parking spot by the hill about midnight and grabbed her things from the back of the car. As she walked to the stairs leading to her room, the sensor light went off outside the garage. A small something scurried away and disappeared into the ivy.

"Probably rats." She mumbled, climbing the stairs. One thing they never tell you about the Hollywood Hills is the infestation of rats that live there. Annabelle turned the key in the lock and another something skittered over the railing. She jumped back. That one was close. She slipped into the apartment, quickly closing the door, not wanting any of them to get in. Annabelle dropped her things and walked like a zombie to the kitchenette on one side of the room. She pulled her last ramen out of the cupboard and waited for the water to heat in the microwave. Once the noodles softened, Annabelle went over to the couch with her bowl. She hardly had enough energy to finish her meal before falling back into the cushions fully clothed and falling into fitful sleep.

She dreamt of demons and dark spaces. Terrible things happening to her parents and a greedy unbecoming version of herself that seemed to take over. It was terrifying and she woke up bathed in her own sweat.

Something scurried away from her unfinished ramen. It looked one of the tiny, dark demons from her dream but that was impossible. Probably a rat that snuck in despite her best efforts.

Annabelle got up and stretched. Sun shone through the thin, yellow curtains of her only window.

What time was it? She wondered.

Her phone rang and Annabelle picked it up staring groggily at the numbers. It was her parents. She hadn't talked to them for three months, not wanting to face their barrage of questions and unsolicited advice. Annabelle hit ignore. She'd talk to them once she got acting work. Her phone read 3pm and there was one message. Annabelle listened. It was the casting office. They wanted her for a call back in Santa Monica today at 4pm.

"Crap. Crap. Crap. Crap!" Annabelle yelled, rushing around and grabbing her things.

"You can come to us instead" a voice hissed in her ear.

"What the hell?" She yelled whipping around, her eyes darting around the apartment. There was no one there. "I don't have time for this" she said, grabbing a brush and running it through her hair. She noticed goosebumps all along her arms even though California was up to its usual, perfect weather. She ignored them, grabbed her shoulder bag and a coat and headed out the door. Her shoe crunched something on the stairs. Annabelle bent and picked up a sharp, white stick. She peered closely and saw that it was a piece of splintered bone.

"Jesus!" she dropped it in disgust. "God damned coyotes."

Annabelle locked her door and dashed to the car. Her shoes crunched again. Another piece of bone lay near the gas pedal. She tossed it out and hit reverse. She was going to have a talk with the landlord about this. The place was infested. Annabelle turned onto the highway and came to a dead stop in rush hour traffic.

"Shit!" she screamed, hitting the steering wheel.

"Come see us" hissed the voice.

She brushed it off, setting her eyes on the next exit. She'd cut through the hollywood hills and hope for less traffic on the surface streets. Annabelle wrenched the wheel and pulled out of the line. An immediate set of tires squealing and swearing bombarded her through the back windows. Annabelle put up her middle finger and headed toward the ramp.

"When in Rome" she said out-loud.

Her phone rang on the seat next to her. It was her parents again. Annabelle hit the ignore button as she turned onto the road that led through the hills. She was pleasantly surprised by the lack of traffic as she wove through the twists and turns, marveling at the afternoon sun filtering

through the oak trees. Burnt orange and gold glistened over everything and Annabelle opened her window to let the colors touch her fingers. The air smelled of sages and dry grass. The car clock read 3:30. She'd made good time on this route and grew hopeful that she might actually make the call back.

"If they want me badly enough, it won't matter" she said to herself relaxing a bit.

"None of it matters" whispered the voice.

Annabelle flipped on the radio to drown it. Garbled songs and hitching static blared out.

"Right...no service up here". She flipped it off.

"It's where you belong" hissed the voice.

Annabelle ignored it thinking about what could happen if she booked this audition. Her mind reeled with the possibilities. This could be it. Her first step into a world she'd wished for all of her life. Butterflies of excitement filled her belly but they were quickly replaced by nausea. A terrible smell was wafting through the window.

"Ug." she quickly rolled up the window, spying a dead animal ahead by the roadside. As she drove closer, Annabelle could see that it was a raccoon. Its body was bloated and rotting. Its head was half bashed in from being run over. The smell of death was everywhere. She carefully swerved around it but it was impossible not to gape at the size and horror of the scene. Her eyes lingered on the smashed head and she noticed it was missing half of its jaw bone. Annabelle shivered and drove on. The hill wound higher and the shadows grew longer. She was almost at the peak when she slammed on her brakes coming around a corner. A large tree lay across the road blocking it. A ratty detour sign pointed to a dirt road to her right.

"Great." muttered Annabelle. "What I get for not taking the highway."

Her phone rang again. Her parents. She hit the ignore button and maneuvered her car onto the road. It was only wide enough for one car and no place to pull over or turn around. Annabelle bumped her way forward peering through the encroaching evening gloom. It was early December and the sun would be setting soon. Bits of the golden hour burst through the thick growth of trees like tiny lasers.

"Maybe it didn't matter." Annabelle thought to herself. If she didn't make it to this audition, there would be other chances. A break in the forest canopy bathed her car in light and she squinted through the intense colors of the setting sun. "What was she thinking! Of course it mattered." Annabelle pushed on the gas increasing her speed. Dust kicked up behind the car and she was quickly engulfed by the growth again.

"It doesn't matter here" the voice hissed. There seemed to be more of them this time.

Annabelle looked down at her phone. No service. Even the clock was stuck at 3:46pm.

"Come on." she said.

Maybe the casting director would understand if she told her what happened. She pushed on the peddle a bit more. The rear of her car fishtailed and caught the side of the road. Annabelle tensed, realizing that if her car went down these steep embankments and she was hurt or pinned, she would have no phone service to call for help. Her back wheels caught and she lurched forward. The car hiccuped and stalled completely. Annabelle sat in the quiet gloom. Her breath quick and her hands tensed around the steering wheel. She was bathed in sweat.

“Stupid” she scolded herself. She opened the car door and got out. An evening chill was already falling over the hills and she shivered, grabbing her coat from the back seat. She put it on and leaned against the car taking a deep breath. She exhaled and a white cloud of condensation poured from her lips like being in the fields in Kansas. Annabelle tried to remember Kansas but it was some distant dream she didn’t really want to remember. Even her parents faces were hard to conjure up in this place.

“They don’t need you.” whispered the voice.

Tears rimmed her eyes as doubt, despair and an encroaching dread crept through her mind. What if it was true? What if they didn’t need me? What if nobody needed her? This town certainly didn’t. If she had gone over that embankment, would anyone have cared? A sob escaped her. It sounded strange and raw in this quiet, shrouded place.

Something scuttled in the bushes in front of her. Annabelle squinted, trying to get a look at it. Several more things shook the bushes to her left. “They really need to do something about the rats in the Hollywood Hills” she thought, before turning to get back in the car. Her foot came down on something.

“Crunch” her foot came down on something.

She picked it up. Another bone splinter. Annabelle crouched down to look more closely by her feet. Her eyes widened in horror. The entire road was a mass of bone splinters. She screamed and fell backward. The bones pricking through her jeans and into the palms of her hands. Something leathery ran across the back of her hand. She pulled it close, looking around frantically. “Where was she? What was happening?”

“You are where you should be.” whispered the voice.

“Shut up!” She yelled, her words thudding against the cool, dead air. “I should be at my audition!”

“And so you will be” hissed the voice. But this time it was a thousand voices.

Annabelle watched as dozens of creatures crawled toward her from the undergrowth. They weren’t much bigger than toads. Black skin, yellow eyes, no hair and sharp clawed human hands and feet. They looked like tiny demons from her dream.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Annabelle yelled, scrambling back against the car in terror.

They didn’t answer only scurrying closer to her in little bursts with bright and ancient eyes.

“This must be a dream. This can’t be happening.” Annabelle whispered to herself. “If I just close my eyes and force myself awake, I’ll be back in my little apartment safe and sound.” She squeezed her eyes shut willing herself to wake up. Nothing. Her eyes popped open and the demons were closer. She heard the muffled ring of her phone in the car. Annabelle opened the door and scrambled toward it. It was her parents.

“ Hello!? Hello?”

“Annabelle? Is that you?” Their voices sounded muffled and far away.

“Mom? Dad? Are you there? Can you hear me? I’m in trouble. I’m in the Hollywood Hills somewhere. I don’t know where. You have to help me.”

“Who is this?” her mother asked.

“Annabelle. You have to come get me. Please!”

“I’m sorry. I must have dialed the wrong number.”

“It’s me! Your daughter.”

“I don’t have a daughter.”

“Mom! Please. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t call you. Help me, please.” Annabelle was sobbing, tears running fast and hot down her cheeks.

“Nobody is coming to help you” hissed a voice on the phone that was not her mother’s.

Annabelle knew it was too late. She hadn’t heeded her parents advice. The world had forgotten her. At least this version of her. Someone or something else would take her place. Annabelle lay across the car seats and let the creatures cover her. She felt no pain just a draining like a tub of water being let out into a great, wide ocean. Her mind tried to hold onto her memories but they swirled together and faded, nothing was clear or distinct anymore. She watched as a different Annabelle sat up and started the car. She watched as a different Annabelle drove off to make it to her audition.

Annabelle’s last thoughts were not of her tiny Kansas town or of her sweet, loving parents. She only wondered if the other version of her would book that audition and as the demons devoured the last of her, she realized in horror, that she would never know.

