

## The Beautiful Annabel Lee

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A sparrow flapped overhead as Jack Walsh stared at the body by his feet. His watch read 3:37am. He siphoned his milky coffee with reverence, careful not to drip any on the sheet the police had draped over the girl when they arrived.

### *Student of Trylind High Falls Off Water Tower to Her Death*

*The body of Annabel Lee Corbin was discovered early Tuesday morning near McAllister Avenue after falling off the Trylind County water tower during a thunderstorm. There were no witnesses, only a neighbor who told emergency responders that she might have heard "a light thud" a few hours earlier.*

The man who Jack assumed to be the girl's father stood about ten feet from the body with his arms crossed and an unlit cigarette limp on his lips. His hair was rumpled and he wore a pair of grease-stained Wranglers and fleece slippers. The blinding blue and red from the cop car illuminated his face, which was crumpled in confusion, as if his daughter's body was too much to comprehend. A small pang of something shaped like sympathy knotted in Jack's chest as he approached the man.

"Need a light?" he offered, holding his lighter out between them.

Chevy was thinking about other things. Raising a cigarette to his lips happened automatically like the way his daughter used to tuck her hair behind her ear only to let it fall back in place a moment later. He pictured his wife Maureen at home in bed where he left her, a patch of drool blossoming by her mouth. He wondered if she'd wake up and worry that he was gone, or if she'd assume he had left to tow a car, which was often the case. She didn't even stir when the phone rang. Now, as the reality of the phone call settled, Chevy longed for the Budweiser in the refrigerator by

the bag of leftover McDonalds he had planned to nuke for breakfast. He almost grabbed it for the ride over but thought better of it and left empty handed with just his Marlboros in his back pocket.

*Chevy Corbin identified the girl as his daughter from his first marriage to Amelia Rinestart. He was at a loss as to why Annabel, still a senior in high school, would climb the water tower by herself at that time of night. "I thought she was home in bed," he said shortly after identifying her body, "She's a good kid. It just makes no sense." Although there were beer cans found at the scene, an autopsy revealed that she had not been drinking before she climbed the tower, and there were no signs that anyone else had been with her.*

One of the cops, flush-cheeked and lanky, crunched one of the beer cans scattered around the legs of the water tower. He whispered to his partner, "I hate to be the one to say it, but she was kind of asking for it. I mean, that was some rain tonight. You'd have to be bat shit—"

"Sh!" the other officer hissed at him, darting her eyes in Jack's direction.

Chevy finally took the lighter, flicked it, and took a long drag without ever noticing Jack. He was trying to pinpoint where he'd gone wrong with Annabel. Maureen always nagged him about being too easy on her. Maybe he was. But he felt anxious around her, never sure if she'd forgiven him all his mistakes or not—if she realized yet that they were mistakes.

Jack saw the light as a signal to make his move.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, stepping closer, "Are you the girl's father?" Chevy glanced for the first time at Jack. The lights of the cop car glared on his glasses, giving him the look of a maniacal robot. But with a mustache.

Jack paused, his real question stinging his tongue. *Suicide? Was it suicide? Why? Bullying? Pregnant? Secretly gay but too terrified to confront it?* But he waited. His gaze wandered along the pale locks of hair that spilled over the grass. It was almost as white as the make-shift shroud.

Annabel's hair was still damp from the downpour that drenched her as she climbed the tower several hours earlier. If anyone had asked, she would have told them that death hadn't crossed her mind that night. She felt the shock of the cold metal in her palms and how the thunder vibrated through her body, but death? She was too preoccupied by the little sigh in her head, "*Annabel Lee, is that the best you can be? Remember, dear child, you're living for me.*"

The only way to go was up, one rung at a time. She knew there was level space on top where she could rest. In the morning, once it was dry, she could watch the sun rise over Trylind County and then climb down safely. It was the vantage point she was after—she hadn't expected the storm. But the clouds rumbled in quickly, and she was not the type to stop something once she'd started.

*Annabel was well known by students who mourn the unexpected loss of their classmate and friend. Trylind High principal, Mrs. Greishland lamented, "Annabel was a lovely girl. We're all heartbroken. I just go to way too many students' funerals. I hope the other students learn from this—you are young but not invincible."*

School had never appealed to Annabel. She was too filled with energy to be still. It was action that she craved. She would try anything once, do it all the way and be done with it. That was how she'd always been. When she was fourteen, Brayden, a guy from her science class, invited her to her first real party. He was a year older because he had been held back in middle school.

"J. D.'s brother's gonna get us a couple of kegs," he told her, flicking his shaggy bangs out of his face and puffing on a cigarette in the bathroom. Annabel stood facing the mirror with her back to him as she applied her dark red lipstick, carefully smoothing the run-off with the edge of her pinky.

"What time?" she asked, puckering at her reflection.

She told her dad that she was sleeping over her friend Becky's house. He laughed with a

mouth full of ham sandwich at Stewie swimming in circles on the TV screen calling “Marco!” in a pool with a cartoon Helen Keller. His eyes were already pink and glazed, so she took the laugh as a yes and left.

When she walked into the party, Brayden sauntered up to her from his perch on the arm of a couch, beer sloshing out of his red plastic cup as he did.

“Yo,” she said, raising her hand for a fist bump.

“Hey,” he clasped her hand and pulled her towards the keg. “Want a drink?”

Annabel saw her dad drink beer every night with dinner, while watching the local news interspersed with episodes of *Family Guy*, and then, just alone in the dark, tipping them back on the couch until he fell asleep. She took a big gulp from the cup that Brayden handed her. And another. And when someone offered her a swig of his Jack Daniels that he had tucked in a paper bag, well, she took that, too.

That night Annabel saw stars rising up out of the darkness inside of her and watched them burst somewhere behind her eyelids in colorful snakes of light. As she slowly came to, she heard sounds buzzing like the power from a live wire fizzling.

“Man, there’s nothing you can do,” J.D. brooded, “I mean, you’re asking for it if you drink that much anything. These new kids don’t know how to enjoy a goddamn beer.”

She blinked her eyes open. She was on her back staring at Brayden's face and white ceiling tiles. Her hair was sticky with vomit and her clothes were wet. Lifting her head felt like raising a watermelon on a toothpick. They were in a strange room with a giant dog crate in the middle, a treadmill with no band in the corner and Sports Illustrated magazines in untidy stacks on every available surface.

“Well, fuck, Annabel,” Brayden groaned as he backed away from her, stabbing his hands through his hair in exasperation.

"Dude, you drank like twice what everyone else had, and that was before you did a keg stand for like, five minutes. And you didn't spill a drop. It was pretty sick. You didn't even wake up when we put you in the shower. We were just gonna call J.D.'s brother to drop you off in front of the ER," reported Becky who sat cross-legged on a pile of the magazines, fiddling with the plastic rosary around her neck.

Annabel propped herself against a stack of magazines that slithered away and left her reclined and facing the ceiling again. She smiled to herself. Then she vomited. The foamy liquid stained Mike Weir's right cheek and shoulder on the most recent Sports Illustrated issue of the lot. Her own cheek stuck to the headline that read: A Star is Born.

*Annabel was enrolled at the Trylind County Vocational Institute in the electro technician program, which some students can opt to do instead of college preparation. Gerald Lutz, her teacher, described her as a pretty good student. "You could tell she was a bright young lady," he told the Tribune.*

"Mr. Corbin, right?" Jack tried again.

"Yeah," Chevy responded, almost more of a grunt than a word.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, sir. How old was she?"

"Eighteen. Just turned eighteen in March."

Jack scribbled on his notepad. That made Chevy nervous. He didn't like the looks of this mustachioed robot man.

"Who are you again?"

"I'm Jack Walsh from the *Trylind Tribune*. I mostly cover crimes or other things of that nature. Late night stuff. Like this," he said thoughtlessly, gesturing with his notepad to Annabel's body. Chevy spit out a hefty exhale of smoke that obscured his features. Jack cringed at the

brusqueness of his own words and pushed up again on the bridge of his glasses that were forever sliding down the slope of his nose. He suffocated a yawn and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Corbin, can you think of any reasons your daughter, Ashley, might—"

"Annabel."

"Right, so sorry, Annabel—I have that written here—why Annabel Lee might want to climb the water tower? Or why tonight specifically?"

A memory flashed in Chevy's mind of Annabel the first time they went to the shore. It was just the two of them and his girlfriend at the time, Susana. Annabel kept running to the ocean, wading in up to her waist. She was so tiny in her frilled pink bathing suit that Susana had bought her for the trip. He kept his eye on her white-blond head bobbing along the water. He had to keep shouting her name to warn her not to go in so far. "*Annabel! ANNABEL LEE!*" Amelia had gotten the name from some poem she read in high school. When she was in labor, half-delirious from pain medication, she looked up at Chevy with a faraway stare and insisted that their daughter must be named Annabel Lee. It was his last moment with her before they rushed her to the ICU.

*Police received an anonymous call about Annabel's body around 2 a.m. Her step-mother, Maureen Corbin, told the Tribune that Annabel had not come home from school that day, but that it was not uncommon for her to go out with friends after school and stay out late.*

Bon Jovi's voice sputtered from the headphones of Annabel's Walkman, hidden from sight on the ledge of the water tower. She loved Bon Jovi since the day she found his music in a shoebox of her mom's things pushed in the back of her dad's closet. There was a picture of her, a Polaroid of a woman with blonde, teased hair pointing a phone like a sword at the person with the camera. Her mouth was open like maybe she was yelling, but maybe she was about to burst into laughter.

Annabel kept it. There was a note, too.

*“Chev, I missed you this morning! Please stop towing cars at night. I hate your beeper. I love you. I’ll stop by the shop later to bring you lunch!”*

It was signed with a heart and had been written on a corner of a piece of newspaper.

Annabel left the note and took the tape, Bon Jovi by Bon Jovi. She imagined that the woman on the cassette picture was her mother, one long leg arching out of a fur-collared coat, dark red lips and her hand placed confidently on her hip. She listened to the tape in her dad’s truck after he’d gone to bed. Chevy found her curled across the front seats in the morning, his gas tank empty and the battery almost dead. He grounded her but let her keep the tape.

“What was Annabel like?” Jack asked Chevy who was burning through his second cigarette.

“Like her mother,” he answered, barely thinking first. He’d never told her himself, but she was just like Amelia. The same green eyes with amber flecks. The same soft, inward bend of her knees. The same stern line of her mouth when she was angry. Even Annabel’s laugh reminded him of Amelia—the way it always stopped short of fullness, like she was always catching her breath.

On the day Annabel was born, the doctor approached Chevy shaking his head as he broke the news. There were complications. Amelia didn’t make it. He couldn’t process it. Amelia was gone? Just like that? He staggered back, bumping into a vending machine. He stood there, blinking back tears, unable to speak or hear the doctor who continued to explain that Amelia had lost a lot of blood, that they did everything they could, but that her body couldn’t handle it.

Chevy heard the doctor ask if he wanted to see his daughter, Annabel Lee. The words reached him as if traveling through water. He shook his head no and left, shouldering the doctor out of his way like a drunken man stumbling. He drove down the road to the gas station where he

bought two six packs of Bud and immediately downed half a pack in his car, trying to hide his tears even from himself. After a few hours of staring blankly at the blurred traffic light change, green, yellow, red, yellow, green, he drove back and lumbered into the hospital to ask for his daughter.

As he held her for the first time, he was shocked by how big Annabel's eyes were. The nurse assured him she couldn't see much yet, but he swore she was looking right into him. It was jarring. She was a real person, and he'd helped bring her into the world.

When Annabel turned five, Chevy decided to tell her how her mom died. Annabel's chest swelled with rage, and she refused to eat for almost three days, only sucking on Tootsie Pops but spitting out the slimy, rock-like tootsie ball in the middle. She caved when Chevy, with tears in his eyes, crawled on his knees towards her with a chocolate, cream-filled tasty cake in his cupped hands.

It was then that she began to hear the sigh, sourced from a confused and unlocatable guilt. It would wake her in the middle of the night or wisp along her neck as she brushed her teeth, "*Annabel Lee, is that the best you can be? Remember, dear child, you're living for me.*" If she sat still for too long, coloring or watching TV, she would start to hear it over and over. The only way to quiet it was by moving, by distracting her mind from its own internal hum. She found that going for long walks or listening to music—loud, happy music—was the best and sometimes only way to make it stop.

*Police officers say that it is unlikely that a girl of her stature could have climbed to the top during a rainstorm. "That ladder is long. It would've been a tough job for a football player," Officer Regent explained. Since no one saw her climbing or knew about her plans to climb the tower, there was no verification of a timeline or motive. Based on her injuries, it was a fall from high up on the tower.*

Annabel had never thought things all the way through. She was impulsive. And stubborn. On her sixteenth birthday she took the local bus downtown to the metropolitan station with a duffle

bag, wearing a long, black coat belted at her waist. She wore her dark red lipstick and borrowed a pair of Maureen's stilettos. She wanted to feel like an adult, and by God did she in that outfit. Her plan was to buy a one-way ticket to the city and try her luck as a model. She'd only told Brayden about her plan, and he agreed it was a good idea and that he'd join her as soon as he got his mechanic's certification.

The price of a ticket to the city had gone up since she had checked. Annabel didn't have enough money, and the attendant did not take mercy on her, judging her harshly for her attention-grabbing outfit. When she finally gave up trying to convince them to let her get on the bus, it was past eight, and the local bus stopped running because it was a weekday. It was a long walk home, but she was not about to sleep in the bus station on her birthday. She decided she'd walk to Brayden's, which was half the distance of her place, and crash on his floor for the night. Taking out her Walkman, she turned on "It's My Life", her favorite song, and began walking. She figured if she kept a good pace, she could make it in a couple of hours or less.

After almost five miles, her feet ached, but Brayden's apartment building was close. Just as she was passing by the 24-hour gas station, someone accosted her from behind, wrapping his hands around her waist. Before she knew what was happening, her back was pressed into the gravel, and she stared up at a green dumpster beside the station.

Annabel hit and scratched her attacker until he pinned her wrists to the ground. She recognized the face looming above her, Tony Maldani, his thick eyebrows and oily nose. She was pretty sure she'd seen him lurking around J.D.'s parties before and remembered having the feeling that he was watching her. She screamed, but he put his mouth over hers to stop her. She tried to bite him as hard as she could, but he just laughed and pulled back, saying, "Feisty, huh?" as if he was enjoying it.

It all happened in under five minutes, though to Annabel it felt like an eternity. Maldani

unpinned her hands and playfully slapped the inside of her thigh. She quickly pulled up her panties and belted her coat. She wanted to slap him, to kick him, but she was too weak, was shaking everywhere. She sharpened her gaze, concentrated it on his dark eyes.

“Why?” she demanded. He was still smiling as he zipped his pants.

“I seen you around, Annabel. You were asking for it,” he answered without batting an eye, handing her the Walkman that had fallen from her hands when he grabbed her.

“I asked for nothing,” she hissed, “you’ll pay for this, you psychopath!” She felt a warm liquid on her inner thigh and reached between her legs. With blood streaked fingers, she made to smack his face. He cupped his hand over hers on his cheek, yanked it away, and then kissed the palm.

Her tears blurred her vision to the point that she couldn’t buckle her shoes around her ankles. She stumbled barefoot to Brayden’s, stopping on his porch to cry before throwing a stone at his window to get his attention. He came to the front door tapping his cigarette pack against the palm of his hand. When he saw her, eyes swollen and hair matted, he pulled two cigarettes out of the pack, offering one to Annabel who shook her head no and then began crying again in spite of herself. At first all she could do was let the sobs come like contractions clenching her chest while Brayden sat beside her, rubbing her back for comfort. When she managed to sputter the name Tony, his face darkened.

“Tony what?” he demanded, his voice flat, the muscles of his jaw visibly tensing, “Tony what, Annabel?”

She finally said the words to him. Then she fell silent. It was the only time she would speak them out loud.

Sitting in his booth at the gas station, Tony Maldani had made no attempt to flee or to hide his deed. He did not feel guilty because he did not believe he’d done anything wrong. In fact, he

thought that perhaps there was some affection budding between he and Annabel who he'd noticed walking around town, always with a distant look in her green eyes. She seemed like a girl who needed some love. His father had always told him that women would never ask for love but needed it more than anything, so Tony simply gave it to her. He stared into the darkness, chewing gum lazily with his hand on his cheek where she'd passionately impressed her fingers into his pocked skin.

When Brayden showed up, he wasted no time pulling Tony out of the glass booth by his collar and busting him in the eye. Then, he kned him with full force between his legs and in the nose, leaving Tony curled on the ground, gasping. Brayden stomped his foot on Tony's temple applying pressure until he thought he might actually smash his skull. He squatted down close to his head.

"Don't even think about looking at her. Not a glance. Not a word. Not a fucking thought at her. If I see you even try to step near one of J.D.'s parties, I will smash your head to the pile of fucking shit that it is."

Tony rolled onto his back and managed to get up off the ground. He stumbled to the bathroom of the gas station to wash the blood off of his face. The marks on his cheek that Annabel had left washed away, and it seemed that all physical evidence of their violent bond disappeared.

*Annabel loved music, Gone with the Wind, and taking walks. She was full of energy, brimming with life and love. "She hit some rough patches," her father told the Tribune, "most kids around her age do, but she always bounced back. She was no weakling." Annabel had just turned 18 in March and was set to graduate with the rest of her class this Friday night.*

Jack swigged the last of his coffee. He noticed for the first time that the shorter cop was a woman with her hair tucked in her hat. He had her name down as simply "Officer Regent". She was

bent over, shooing away a bird that was hovering too close to Annabel's body. Chevy stared in that direction, still not seeming to absorb anything while he worked on his fourth cigarette. Jack's lighter was now tucked in Chevy's pocket, but he didn't ask for it back.

"Were you close with your daughter, Mr. Corbin?"

Chevy considered the question, *close with my daughter?* The past few years had been pretty messy. Maureen knew about the baby before Chevy. He worked long hours at the auto shop and only really saw Annabel at night, usually when she was passing through the TV room to go to her bedroom or to the kitchen and back. Once she'd gotten to middle school, they hadn't talked much. He didn't know what to say. Or rather, he did, he knew a lot of things to say but never how to say them, so he just stuck to the basics.

—How's school, Annabel?

—Fine.

—And your friends? You have a boyfriend?

—No, dad.

—What about that Brayden boy who always hangs around?

—No, we're just friends, dad.

—You'd tell me if you did, though, right?

—Yes, dad. Good night, dad.

Chevy wondered how he'd tell Sonny, who was still asleep, his thumb tucked in his mouth flat on his back in bed. That would hurt the most—at least Annabel never knew her mom, like being born without sight rather than losing it. He tried to imagine himself kneeling beside the low bed, resting an elbow on the pillow and running his hand through the boy's hair, "Sonny, hey bud, I have to tell you something. Mommy's not coming home."

Annabel had wanted to get an abortion. She didn't want to have a baby, lest it be the child of

Tony Maldani. When she was certain that she was pregnant, she wrote to her grandfather to ask him for her birthday money that he'd forgotten to send, hoping it'd be enough. Maureen caught her looking in her purse for stamps and demanded she explain herself. Annabel confessed that she was pregnant and didn't want the baby. Maureen freaked out and told Chevy.

"Abortion, Annabel? And you know who the dad is?" Chevy knew it was his fault. He knew if Amelia was alive, none of this would be happening. Annabel would be going to college or something. He should have talked to her about sex, about how stupid boys are, about how much he loved her.

"I don't want it, dad. I've thought about it. I—," but she stopped short of telling him why.

"Well, did you think about it when you were out spreading your legs? You're only a kid for Chrissake!" Maureen burst in making a wide 'v' with her middle and pointer fingers, "This is a prayer God can see no matter how dark the room is."

Annabel gave birth to a boy and named the baby Sonny. She thought she'd give him up, but when she looked into his filmy, dark eyes and felt his head nestle against her chest, she sobbed and made everyone leave the room. She clung to him and flailed her free arm at anyone who came near. It wasn't long before she fell asleep, exhausted from labor. When her head dipped to the side, the nurses were finally able to slip in and pluck the baby from her arms.

*Annabel is survived by her son, Sonny. A friend, Brayden Thompson, said she had plans to become an electrician and move to California with her son in the fall after graduating. Annabel's father and step-mother will take custody of her child.*

Raindrops lost grip and slid down the metal of the tower. Chevy imagined that some of Annabel's breaths still hung somewhere in the air around him. He inhaled deeply and blew out a

cloud of smoke.

“Is there anything else you’d like to add, Mr. Corbin?” Jack unsuccessfully tried to stifle a yawn. He checked his watch. 4:55. He had only a few hours to get another coffee and then get to the high school to get permission to speak with students. He figured that someone there might be able to shed some light on why a young girl would do such a crazy thing. He had the name Brayden down as a friend and a Mr. Lutz, her teacher. If it wasn’t suicide, which he was still leaning towards, maybe it was for some poetic love confession, or a dare. There was a reason for everything after all. It was a matter of asking the right person the right question.

Chevy pictured Amelia’s grave. He hadn’t visited in over a decade and felt ashamed. Annabel had asked him about going earlier in the week. He had been afraid to take her back there after the first time when she hugged the headstone and refused to let go. He didn’t want her to picture her mom as a slab of stone, and he didn’t want her to be reminded of how her mom died. So he avoided it all together.

He heaved a sigh and stubbed out his cigarette in the wet grass without raising another to his lips. Jack took it as a cue and closed his notebook. He glanced once more at the body, the girl’s narrow frame outlined under the sheet that ruffled in the wind as the EMT’s carried it across the grass. He shook Chevy’s hand, nodded solemnly and turned to go back to his car.

*A memorial service will be held on Thursday afternoon at 4:15 at St. Mary’s Church off of Elm Street. The Corbins invite the community to pay their respects to their daughter, Annabel Lee. “She brought light to our lives, and even though she’s not here now, it has not gone out.”*

The sun huddled somewhere behind clouds bereft of rain. The sparrow flew through the damp air with a strand of blonde, almost-white hair in its beak. It landed on the edge of its nest that

it had built on top of the water tower and wove the long strand into the twigs to repair the damage from the storm. She had lost all of her eggs except one in the night when a strong gust of wind toppled the nest and sent it rolling towards the edge of the tower. Three of the eggs were lost, but a human appeared out of nowhere and caught the sparrow and the nest that had one egg stuck in its lining. It would be days before the hatchling would break through its shell. She had to protect it, the only one left. A faint trickling sound played through the air.

*"It's my life, it's now or never! I ain't gonna live forever! I just wanna live while I'm alive..."* Bon Jovi sang on from Annabel's forgotten Walkman. On Sunday night, the eve of Amelia's fortieth birthday, Annabel had a dream in which she envisioned herself gazing down on her mother's grave from the tower in the orangey light of the new day. The next morning she resolved herself to do it.

As she was placing a foot on the top ledge of the tower after the harrowing climb, a bolt of lightning illuminated the sky. In that moment, she saw a bird nest about to slip over the edge. She caught the nest with one hand, setting it on the ledge when her foot slipped. Annabel tried to grab onto the tower but couldn't grasp anything. As she fell, she crossed her arms over her chest and imagined her body tumbling in jagged angles through the rain.

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*For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side  
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,  
In her sepulchre there by the sea—  
In her tomb by the sounding sea.*

Final stanza of *Annabel Lee* by Edgar Allen Poe