

# MERCY

Annabelle Dyer stood outside the Hide Motel, doubting that she had the courage to walk through its doors. Shocked she was at how quickly the site had changed since she had left Oakland. The most famous prostitutes and pimps that were seemingly keeping up the place had migrated to greener pastures, leaving the building to be occupied by a few dozen crack whores and their less than deserving management. Yet, to Annabelle's delight, all that was once familiar to her was not lost.

The Catholic church that was a half block west from where she was resting still appeared to be a sturdy structure, unlike the other buildings that surrounded it--the neighborhood bank, Joe's Meat Market, the community theatre, and those lavish apartments that only the well off could afford. All of which were now desolate, abandoned, stricken with negligence that allowed a brutal army of weeds and vines to climb bricks and bury all windows and doors.

Annabelle had mind to write about that instead of the stranger's story. Writing about empty lots and abandoned buildings was definitely the safer choice. Stay here, write here, her mind wavered over and then her ambition stepped in and dropped an anchor that determined her course.

The motel was six stories high and existed in front of a great brick wall that blocked out the sun and any view of the nearby ocean. It oddly created a dark and dry feeling that Annabelle felt made sense for her writing. I can certainly get his confession here, she thought.

Annabelle got out of her car slowly, partially regretting each step she took away from the vehicle. She moved on, forward, in the musk of night. Her low heels tapped the broken sidewalk off beat.

"Daddy, never could keep his sticky fingers off me," Annabelle caught an ear to, as she drew closer to the motel's front doors. "If I fought him, he would fight back. I would always lose, so I stopped fighting." Annabelle listened. "These men who hire me, act just like him. So, when they ask me to call them Daddy, it's not hard for me to do."

The voice had a raspy pitch, like the first sounds to emerge after a long slumber. As Annabelle moved within a few feet of the door, she spotted the woman the voice belonged to, and the young Negro boy that the voice was directed towards.

The boy seemed out of place, sitting on the motel's first step in shiny dress shoes, navy slacks, and a plaid shirt that was button to the neck. He didn't look a day over fourteen years; yet, his eyes expressed that he had seen more than three lifetimes. There were also eyes that were stuck on that woman that Annabelle had heard enough of. She was standing on Motel's third, and final step up. Her body was leaning against the building, just inches from the hotel's double doors. Right off, it was she that Annabelle sunk her attention into, and exactly the way a reporter would be expected to. Annabelle examined the woman over in a few quick glimpses and took mental notes highlighting details about the woman, purely out of habit. *She's 5'4, maybe 5'3. Short brown, curly hair. High yellow skin. Hispanic, perhaps. Eyes red and cloudy. Druggo or heartbroken? Tattoo of the Mother Theresa on her right wrist. Lost soul. Petite black dress two sizes too small. A Hide resident. Lost.*

Annabelle walked pass the Negro boy and towards the hotel's double doors, being careful not to look that woman in the eyes, and praying that neither she nor the boy would ask her what she was doing

there. When she got to the third step and was about to make her way in the building, she realized she wasn't so lucky.

"Tú, mujer local!" shouted the woman.

Annabelle paused nervously.

"So, you just going to walk by me and Joey here and not speak? What kinda manners you got!"

Annabelle held her breath and as the woman pulled a cigarette from between her breasts. She put it to her mouth and let it hang unlit onto her bottom lip.

Annabelle was flushed with confusion on how to handle the moment. She then replied, "You were talking, so I didn't want to disturb you is all." Annabelle was still refusing to look the woman in the eyes, wishing the moment couldn't be real if she didn't face it.

The woman didn't respond quickly. Instead she snatch the cigarette off her lip and held tongue, walking closer to Annabelle-- so close that Annabelle could feel her breathing.

"Do I know you?" The woman asked. "Did you work here before? For Johnnie?"

"No," replied Annabelle, looking down at the cracks in the concrete that seemed to widen the more the woman spoke.

"Then for Rick?"

"No, I've never--" Annabelle took in a deep breath, trying to figure out the right words to say. "I've never done that?"

The woman laughed as did the boy. "And was is that?" The woman asked Annabelle sternly.

"I've never sold my body."

"Maybe that's because no one ever wanted to buy it," said the Negro boy who made the woman smile her way into a cloud of laughter. It was that cloud that helped Annabelle escape the scene.

She moved forward, beyond the two of them, through the motel's double doors that were barely on its hinges, and then up the tall staircase. She didn't trust the elevators or felt brave enough to take the risk of being trapped in one of them, for any moment of time, with some prostitute or pimp who may recognize her. Part of her didn't trust the stranger that she was about to meet either, but if he was the man she figured he was, she had come too close to turn back now.

It was his story she needed. It was his hands. She needed to see them up close for she had heard stories of their mystery, and how they bled from the palms as if they were pierced by nails. She needed to feel those hands and examine those palms that were rumored to open and heal themselves overnight. Of course, all who claimed to have seen this never took a step forward. One step in that stranger's direction, they'd say, was far enough.

"302,304--"

Annabelle read the numbers on the doors: "306, 308." She tried not to pay attention to the crack whores lying in the hallway. A few of them begged her for money in exchange for a good time. Most of them had pale faces and black wrists. Their veins, blue and starving for healthy blood, stood out like train tracks, as a few of them pulled themselves up to stand against the walls by their fingernails, as if that would keep Annabelle from looking down on them. Their skin reeked of booze and dirt, urine and cheap perfume. Their smiles hung crooked; exposing the teeth missing in several mouths. Eyes covered in mascara; hair, mostly commonly bleach blond, even for the black girls.

Annabelle resisted the eye to eye contact and moved forward.

"3010"

She found herself stepping over fragile legs that were laid out in the middle of the hallway. Without intention, she caught glimpses of how prostitutes conducted their business, how their pimps negotiated their prices, before pocketing their cash. She saw men with wedding bands, and minds high as a kite, being pulled into dim lit rooms. She couldn't help but wonder which room is where she and her mother parted ways. Which room did her mother leave her in to fend for herself?

Annabelle's feet moved slower when she came within a few feet of the older whores, those women she studied briefly, wondering could either of them be her mother. In fact, she looked for a resemblance; long legs, fiery red hair, big green eyes, a round forehead, and ears that, 'though undersized, could seem to catch every sound wave. Yet, no one she saw fit that description, and part of her was glad it was so.

In front of room 333 she paused, She took a few deep breaths and dug one of her hands into her cheap handbag, which served more like a carrying case, and moved it around to feel that all she needed was there.

"Keys, check. Recorder, check. Breath mints?"

She let her hands fumble around in her purse a little harder, and when she found the mints she smiled, lodging them into her mouth four by four to be certain that this interview would start off on the freshest note. ! She thought to knock on the door before she realized that it was cracked. Suddenly, regret overwhelmed her. She took a step back, and then another, while sticking her hands back into her purse and this time pulling out the photograph that brought her there.

She scanned it over. Her eyes focused on at a middle age man standing in front of a Catholic church, wearing a clerical color. No man who stands on holy ground that boldly can be dangerous, she said to herself. Unknowingly, her feet were closing in on the door, and then after the slightest push from her right hand, she was in.

Perhaps, it was the darkness that numbed my senses, Annabelle thought to herself, realizing that if it were not for the slight echo of the man's voice, she wouldn't have known he was there. Instinctively, her hands searched the wall for a light switch, and when the light came, she saw a man cradled in a corner, praying, dressed casually in blue jeans and an oversize t-shirt that read Forgive. He had no clerical collar around his neck, and he wore brown leather gloves on his hands, despite the hot weather.

When he finished his prayer, about a minute later, he stood tall and walked slowly towards her. His arms from the elbows down were exposed, revealing a few tattoos of falling angels. Their wings were broken and their mouths were stretched wide, as if they were screaming.

Besides the likeness in complexion, Annabelle couldn't recognize the man that was approaching her from the photograph. His hair was no longer neatly cut low to his head, but about an inch too long and unkempt to look civilized. Without the black suit and the clerical collar around his neck, he looked dangerous. Then her fear set in.

She thought over the steps she'd made, and internally chastised herself for her impetuous actions. Her mind filled with criticizing remarks that slowly lowered her head. 'You put yourself into the lion's den,' she heard echoing in her mind. 'If you die here, it's all your fault.'

Suddenly, she thought of the photograph, wondering why she overlooked the oddness of its delivery. How was it sent? she thought of now. Thinking back on how it arrived; neatly packaged in a white envelope, with no hired postman, no man or woman in a brown uniform tapping on her office door, demanding her signature in exchange for it, no office mailman with even the clue of how it ended up onto her desk after her lunch break, resting amongst her scattered papers, paperclips, and pictures of strangers whose faces were burned much like his.

"You have questions for me?" he asked.

Her feet moved backwards as she pulled the recorder out of her purse. It rattled in her hands, as she thought to dismiss the interview and run for safety.

The stranger continued to walk towards her saying, "What's your question?"

It was then that Annabelle remembered who she was and stopped moving backward. It was progress that she was after.

"Why are you wearing those gloves?" she asked the stranger. "What, you think it's not cold enough in this room to wear them?" he responded, bowing his head that was drenched in sweat. His

footsteps stopped abruptly about a foot from Annabelle, who stared at the door, saddened by how far it appeared.

"It's warm in here and summer outside," she said.

"I don't need you to remind me of that," said the stranger.

He rubbed his gloves together and walked towards the door. To maintain a comfortable space, Annabelle instinctively moved a few steps to the East; a decision she quickly regretted. Now, she was further away from the door that seemed guarded by the stranger. He kneeled there, tilting his body slightly to the West, where he grabbed hold of a brown leather bag that Annabelle had overlooked when entering. She figured that the shadows in the dark room were to blame for the oversight, as her eagerness to rewrite history may well be the blame for her death.

As Annabelle watched the stranger, she could hear her heart beat a pace that would match that of inexperienced runners. Her eyes were fixated on his movements, as he sunk his hands in that bag. *What is he going to pull out that bag? She feared. A knife? A gun?* As her eyes stretched in disbelief, her mind had begun thinking of alternative ways to escape.

At first glance, she noticed that to her right was a big window that she could jump out of, but being on the third floor had discouraged that idea. Her attention focused back on the man, who had shockingly pulled a black suit out of the bag, tossed it aside, while keeping a tight grip only on the clerical collar that he quickly placed around his neck.

Annabelle felt more comfortable with the sight of him, until she noticed that he was still wearing those gloves.

"What's your name?" She asked.

"I have many names," he said. "Each of them were given to me by the people who meet me; people like you."

"Like me?"

"I'm sure you'll give me a name before our time here is done."

"Priest, I'll call you?"

"I doubt it," he grinned.

Annabelle felt a sourness settle on her stomach. "You aren't really a priest, are you?" she asked.

"I've been married twice," he answered. "What priest can say that?"

"Then who are you? And why are you still wearing those gloves?"

"I initially wore the gloves for your protection."

Annabelle sighed in worry.

"By I fear I've given this material a responsibility that it can't manage." He replied, staring at those gloves and then at her.

Suddenly the window seemed like a fine place to jump to the reporter.

"You traveled all this way to meet me, here in this place. I'm certain then that you must have better questions to ask me than, "Am I a really a priest, and why do I wear gloves?"

She took a giant step towards the window. "What would you like me to ask?"

"We can start by why I brought you here, to this room, or you can ask me about my hands. I'm sure you have heard that all I touch is dead. Maybe you would like to talk about the burns on my face. Are you wondering how they got there?"

At the moment, Annabelle only wanted to know how she could get out of that room, that hotel, safely. Instinct had her pressed down on the record button in panic when she gathered that the stranger was closer to the door than she was. A fright then came upon her like a quiet storm. She hadn't been this afraid since she was ten years old; back when she and a few other kids played tag in the open space around their orphanage. Then it was her turn to count to thirty and seek to find those hidden. Excited, she counted, "30...29...28..." Her face was cuffed in the right angle of her arms, as her weight pressed

against the only home she ever knew. “3...2...1... here I come!” She shouted playfully, opening her eyes, anxious to tag a friend, only to see a vicious beast blocking her path.

It was a stray; a Rottweiler and part tiger, it seemed to her then. And like now, back then she was much too afraid to scream. She had heard from the other kids, the few who had nervously come out from hiding behind the bushes when they caught a glimpse of the beast in her path, that running would only make matters worse. Running could likely summon an attack, she now remembered her pimply friends saying, with their eyes stretched and their knees knocking against the other.

Now it was her knees that weakened and knocked, as she watched the stranger carefully. He was now the beast in her way, she decided, fearful to run. Her brilliant mind soon began ticking away ideas, as she juggled the recorder in her hands. Then instantly she burst out in laughter.

“You know,” she said giggling, looking at a disturbing seriousness that plastered on the stranger’s face. She then looked down at her recorder for a distraction. “They just don’t make gadgets like they use to,” Annabelle said laughing as convincingly as she knew how, hoping to persuade the stranger to join in or, at least, that her humor would lighten the tension between them.

The stranger just carried a curious look on his face but said nothing.

“My recorder is broken,” she clarified. “There is no way that I can do the interview without it. So we should....ahhh, reschedule don’t you think?”

Annabelle took a second glance at the door and then at the stranger, who had begun taking off his gloves. Immediately, she noticed that his peaceful disposition had passed. She felt then he could smell her fear.

He had hoped that the white collar around his throat would choke any evil rising inside of him, but it didn’t.

He moved towards his guest. The hell with ambition, Annabelle thought, as her feet gradually began moving towards that window. She was hoping he would the stranger would settle but like lightning he struck---leaving her stiff and senseless with one quick flash of his left hand. She landed at his feet, and watched him grab hold of the recorder in his right hand.

He pushed record. “Let’s see if you are a liar,” he said, hovering over her trembling body.

“I’ll ask the questions from here on out.” She gasped for air. “Why are you here?”

She raised a hand to hold the left side her face in a hand, trying to feel if it was still all there, after the devastating hit. “I asked you a question, now tell me why?”

“I came for your story,” she trembled, “but I can leave without it.” She dug her feet into the rough carpet and kicked forward and away from him. He followed in a hurry. Hovering over her, he put one foot against her throat. “My story? My story must stay buried. Do you understand? Do—you-- understand?”

She looked at his hands that had begun to bleed. “All that I touch dies.”

He released the foot and lowered his hands, and instantly the reporter squirmed around on the hard carpet like a fish out of water. He fought to get a grip, and when he got it, he lifted his foot and walked over to his bag by the door. There, he pulled out a match and scrubbed it against a wall, until a flame appeared.

It was then Annabelle named him. “Mercy!” She screamed.

