

SAD ANNIE

James Ulmer

The boy kneeled, absorbed, along a slow-moving stream at the bottom of a deep ravine. He came from the white house on the hillside above, the one with the broad front porch and dark green shutters. Though his view of the house was blocked by the thick boughs of maples and sycamores that rose along the bank of the stream, the boy could feel the influence of the place falling over him, gently, like a silk net.

There were trout in the stream, big ones, and every now and then a sleek length of fish would break the surface and hang in the air for an instant to swallow a water-skimmer or dragonfly that hovered too close to its own reflection in a still, deep pool. But the boy was not interested in catching fish. He was busy trying to redirect the stream, stacking rocks along the streambed to build a dam. Looking up briefly from his task, he saw the June sunlight lying in a bright swatch on the tops of the trees; but down here,

beside the slow-moving stream, breathing in the cool smell of water and wet stone, everything he saw seemed washed in shadow.

Cattails rose along the bank, and on the hillside above them grew a tangle of raspberry brambles and a tall stand of milkweed. One of the pods had broken open, and a few white seeds drifted like tiny white stars across the dark water.

As he returned to his work, diligently stacking stone on stone and fitting smaller rocks into the spaces between them, a sound behind him made him turn. A dog had crashed through the reeds and paused now at the edge of the stream, muzzle raised, regarding him. The English Setter splashed through the shallow water and stood motionless, shoulder to shoulder with the crouching boy. The boy listened to the animal panting, saw the pink tongue spilling over a row of teeth and dark gums, shaking in time to the animal's breath.

The dog scarcely noticed the boy but stood at his side as if on guard, staring into the trees on the far bank. After a moment, the animal dropped his head to lap briefly at the stream. When the dog lifted his muzzle, he shook himself briskly from head to tail, and the boy breathed in the warm smell of dog and a green scent of weeds the animal had crushed bounding through the undergrowth. Again the Setter stared off into the trees, tense, seeming to spot some prey visible only to him. The dog stepped forward,

lunged into the stream, and waded across, shaking himself once more on the far bank. Then he trotted off purposefully into the trees and was gone as quickly as he'd come.

The boy returned to his task. He needed to see if he could change the way the stream flowed. He wasn't sure why this notion possessed him the way it did. Gazing up from the shadows to the birds in the sunlit trees, the boy felt like one of those trout lying in wait on the streambed. For a moment, he felt as if he could leap up and break through the clear surface of the air to snatch a mockingbird from the branches.

Something on the far side of the stream caught his eye. A woman—a girl, really—stood in the spot where the dog had vanished. Even to the boy, the girl seemed instantly out of place. With her knees bent in toward each other and her long legs splayed out, there was something awkward or coltish about her. She wore a top with horizontal black and white stripes, a short black skirt, fishnet stockings, and ankle-high black boots with pointed toes and spike heels. The boy squinted and cocked his head, uncertain of what he was seeing. What was she doing there? Her dark red hair, chopped off at asymmetrical angles, stuck up from her head in every direction. He couldn't have been confronted by a stranger sight if Pinocchio or the White Queen had stepped suddenly out of the trees. The girl seemed, somehow, unstrung, the strength drained from her dangling arms and legs, and the boy

thought of a marionette he'd once seen hanging from a peg on the wall of a puppet master's shop. She stared dejectedly at the ground around her feet.

She appeared to heave a sigh and, glancing up, saw the boy regarding her quizzically. Cupping her hands around her red mouth, the girl called to him across the water.

“Hey you! Boy! Come over here!”

The boy stood to observe her. He folded his arms across his chest. “Why don't you come *here*?” he shouted in reply.

The girl looked doubtfully at the stream that ran between them. She shook her head. “I can't,” she called. “You'll have to come to me!”

The boy shrugged. He'd have to get wet to reach her, but when was that a serious consideration for any boy? He sat on a boulder to roll down the legs of his jeans and put his sneakers on. Then he started for her across the water. The stream rose to his shins, his knees, and past his waist halfway to his chest by the time he reached the middle. He waded forward against the cold pull of the current, gradually emerging in the shallows. In another moment, he'd clambered up the bank and stood, soaking wet, before the waiting girl.

She looked down at him from her dark eyes. “You have to come with me,” she said. “There's something I need to show you.”

“What?” he asked skeptically. She was just a girl. He didn’t have to do what she said.

She shook her head, and her red hair flew around her face, momentarily blurring her features.

“I can’t tell you,” the girl replied. “You have to see for yourself. It’s a secret.”

A secret! thought the boy. He knew then that he had to go with her. But he also knew that he shouldn’t. His parents had warned him not to go off with strangers.

“What’s your name?” he demanded, squinting up at her.

“Annie.”

The boy smiled to himself.

“Okay,” he said, decided. “Show me.”

The girl turned at once toward the trees. “Come on then,” she said, glancing briefly over one shoulder as she spoke. “Follow me.”

So he did. They wove together through the woods, the girl leading the way. Huge maples, sycamores, and elms towered above them, their roots drawing on the rich sediment deposited along the stream. Gradually, the terrain began to climb, and the elms gave way to pine trees. More and more the boy found himself slipping on the slick brown needles, his wet sneakers squeaking, full of river-water. Every few minutes, the girl looked back, urging

him to keep up. Despite her ridiculous boots, she moved easily up the incline, stepping up the flank of the hill as if it were a flight of stairs. The boy struggled to follow, slipping again and again to his hands and knees. He saw a dark smear—mud, he guessed—along one side of her skirt, and the back of one leg of her fishnet stockings was ripped, the web-work opened on a hole the size of his hand. The flesh of her calf showed through—white, cold somehow—and the boy shivered involuntarily. He thought of the porcelain figures his mother kept on the mantel above their living room fireplace.

As they reached the crown of the hill, they emerged from the shadows into light—the gold light, rich as butter, that signaled the end of day. The boy squinted and raised a hand to shade his eyes. Below him, he saw a twisting gray ribbon of highway. A truck came around the bend, a sixteen-wheeler, and an instant later the sound of the engine reached them.

“Hurry,” the girl breathed, turning to him. “It will be dark soon.” And she stepped off quickly downhill into the shadows.

“Annie!” he called after her. “Wait!”

But she didn’t stop.

The boy began to worry then. He was far from home now, and he wasn’t sure he could find his way back in the dark. These woods were deeper and wilder than he’d realized, and there might be bears, even a mountain lion. But as the girl disappeared into the trees below, to his surprise the boy

found his feet stepping after her beyond his will, as if he were being pulled irresistibly by an invisible cord.

Moving down the slope was dangerous. Once, the boy lost his footing and slipped downhill through the pine needles for twenty feet or more before he managed to stop himself against the rough trunk of a tree. He scraped his hands, and they came away smelling like sap. When he reached the bottom of the hill, the girl was waiting for him. She beckoned with one finger and turned into the thicket. The boy hurried after her and found himself in a gulley. Through the trees just above him, he saw the glint of a steel guardrail that marked the edge of the highway.

“We’re here,” she said.

“Where?” the boy asked, confused, glancing around. He was beginning to think she’d played a trick on him. “What’s the secret?”

The girl nodded to the underbrush. “Look.”

He did, and then he noticed what she wanted him to see. Bones lay scattered all around them in the brush: leg bones, a pelvis, the hard grin of a skull.

“Tell the police,” she said.

The boy put his hands over his eyes, backed up against a tree, and screamed. When he dropped his hands, he found himself alone. Heart

pounding, more terrified than he'd ever been in his life, the boy scrambled up the ridge toward the sound of traffic.

Forty minutes later, the boy sat in the back of a parked squad car, wrapped in a blanket, sipping hot chocolate from a Styrofoam cup. Behind him, angled in a line at the shoulder of the highway, stood a second police car, an ambulance, and an unmarked Ford sedan. His mother and father huddled with a female officer a few feet behind the car where the boy sat. They spoke together, their voices low.

“He ran out on the highway and flagged down a driver,” the officer said. “Thank goodness the man stopped.”

“Oh my God!” his mother breathed.

“Fortunately,” the officer continued, “I was already in the area, so it didn't take me long to get here after the call came in. I thought at first he was just some child who'd scared himself in the woods, but when I climbed down into that ditch...”

She left her point unfinished.

“Yeah, he's a pretty level-headed kid.” The boy could hear the pride in his father's voice when he said that.

He gulped down the last of the chocolate, shrugged off the blanket, and climbed out of the squad car. From the guard rail, the boy peered down into

the shadows, past the yellow police tape strung between the trees. Two plainclothes officers moved gingerly through the ravine. The police had closed the road and diverted traffic, so no cars rushed past on the highway. In the stillness of the June twilight, the boy could barely make out the forms of the two men, but their voices floated up to him clearly.

“Here’s another one,” the first detective said.

“How many do you think there are?”

“I don’t know. At least a dozen. From the remnants of their clothes and shoes, I’d say they were all women.” There was a pause, and when the man spoke again the boy could hear the frustration in his voice. “We’ll have to let the coroner sort this out.”

The boy looked on, as usual, from the perimeter. He watched and listened, trying to translate, to understand what had happened. One man was crouching, flashlight in hand, examining something the boy couldn’t see. The cop who was standing stepped away, and after a moment he called out, “Hey Frank, come look at this!”

The one named Frank stood up and joined his partner. They looked down at something in the brush. For a moment neither man spoke, and the boy heard only the steady trill of the crickets in the growing dark.

Then, “There’s still a lot of hair clinging to the skull,” Frank said. “Bright red. That might make her easier to identify.”

“She must’ve been alive when he dumped her,” the second cop put in. “It looks like she was trying to crawl away.” Squinting, the boy made out something pale in the twilight, and then he understood what it was: the bones of a hand reaching out for the base of a tree.

“Right,” Frank agreed. “She wanted to live.” He heaved a sigh. “Christ, let’s get her out of here. Now, before it gets too dark.”

A few minutes later the boy stood with his parents, watching as two paramedics in their white uniforms brought a stretcher up the incline. The men struggled, stepping carefully, trying to keep the stretcher with its black body bag as level as they could. Reaching the top, they stepped over the guardrail, walked the stretcher to the back of the ambulance, slid the body neatly inside, and slammed the doors.

It was night then, the last light gone behind the trees. To the boy’s amazement, Annie emerged from the shadows at the edge of the woods. She stood there in her torn fishnet stockings, her elbows gripped in her hands. The boy wanted to point her out to his parents, but he stopped himself. He knew they wouldn’t see her. A smile flickered across Annie’s red mouth—the only time he’d seen her smile—and the boy’s heart clutched painfully in his chest. Without taking her eyes off him, she stepped away backwards until she was swallowed up in a pool of shadow.

He heard an engine turn over, and the ambulance pulled away, its red light spinning dizzily in the summer dark, painting the black row of pines along the highway.

James Ulmer's collection of ghost stories, *The Secret Life*, was published by Halcyon Press in 2012. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The North American Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *New Letters* and elsewhere. Ulmer is Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Southern Arkansas University.