

# This Flesh, This Ghost

A S T O R Y

by Lynn Freed



**Lynn Freed's novels include *House of Women, The Mirror, The Bungalow, Home Ground, and Friends of the Family*. She received the inaugural Katherine Anne Porter Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and has received fellowships and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. Her story collection, *The Curse of the Appropriate Man*, will be published in September 2004 by Harcourt. Photo by Mary Potts.**

HAD HE NOT BEEN RICH, they would have said Annabel was throwing herself away on a blind man. They said so anyway, watching the way she had to lead him down Joubert Street like a dog. He should be marrying the older one, they said. How would someone like him know the difference between one girl and another?

Well, I could have told them how. The man had ears. Ever since Annabel was a child, they themselves had been remarking on the differences between us. She was tall and beautiful and she sang like a bird. I was shapeless and shy, with small eyes and a large thick nose. Next to her, what could I be to any man, even a blind one?

“Go and tell her he is arrived,” Ma said to me. “And don’t yell.” The sound of him shuffling up the front steps always put her into a bad mood, and today he was staying for lunch, an extra reason. “Why does he have to smile for nothing?” she would grumble. “One of these days I’m going to tell him myself there’s nothing to smile about with such an affliction.”

Ma had always been unsettled by an affliction greater than her own. All her life, from youth to widowhood, from one country to another, she had been followed by disappointment. Nothing except Annabel had ever come along to reward her expectations.

And now this.

I found Annabel stretched out on her bed, examining a picture she had just cut out of a magazine. She was a lazy girl, secretive and strange as well. All around the walls were pictures—not film stars and glamour girls, just things she took a fancy to—a pilot leaning on the wing of a small plane, a view of a bay from a balcony, with yachts and swimmers, and white cliffs in the distance.

“Close the door,” she said to me, “I can’t stand it. She’s frying onions for a change.”

I picked up the picture she had been looking at. It was a painting really, but if you cut off the frame, you would think it was real—a real pool in a real forest. Three nymphs were in the pool, all naked, and they had caught hold of a creature—half bull, half man, with horns and hooves and a wild look in his eye. “What is it?” I asked.

But she was sitting at the dressing table now, humming. She was always humming. I used to think she did it to remind me that I couldn’t keep a tune myself. But really it had nothing to do with me. It was herself she was pleasing, the way the mirror pleased her, and people turning to watch her pass in the street.

“What if we could suddenly disappear?” she said. “I mean, dissolve? Like sugar? Or like salt?”

She was full of questions like this, but they were never interesting to me. What I liked was to stand in the kitchen, weighing flour against eggs, or to work out a pattern for a blouse from Ma’s old taffeta skirt. I was the one who would be making Annabel’s wedding dress. Years ago she had cut a picture of a bride out of *McCall’s* magazine, and for years I had been staring at it, wondering how I would pin the tucks to hide the seams and darts.

“Have you ever thought that if you cut a loaf of bread in half, it can never be whole again?” she asked into the mirror. “What if we could see our bodies growing older from one hour to the next? What if we knew exactly when we were going to die?”

WHEN I CAME DOWNSTAIRS, he was standing at the front window, as if he could actually see out. Until the wedding, he and Annabel were only allowed to meet if I was with them. She would put on a record, and then they would sit on the couch and she would sing along while he ran his fingers all around her face and down her throat. You could see that for both of them she was up on the stage and he was down in the audience again, falling in love with her for the first time.

I was at City Hall the night it happened. I had watched him follow his aunt to their seats, smiling, excusing himself to the people he bumped into. He had worn a navy cravat and a white linen suit. People said he was too handsome to be blind. They also said he was too shy to find a wife. And that girls came to his house all the time, cheap girls from the docks. And that it wasn’t girls he wanted at all, or why wouldn’t he have found one for himself whether he could see her or not?

“Beatrice?” he said, turning as I came into the room. By now he always knew which of us had come in. But the first time he’d come to the house, he’d tried to give me the roses

he'd brought for Annabel. It was his aunt who'd had to pull his arm back. "This is the older sister," she'd explained to him. "Perhaps they'll be able to share the flowers later."

He reached into his pocket now and held out a small box with a bow on top. "I brought you a present, Beatrice," he said.

He often brought presents for no reason. If Ma saw them, she clicked her tongue and said, "One of you isn't enough for him? Maybe he wants me, too, that chancer."

But still, I loved to get whatever he gave me. So far, I had a sewing box and an alarm clock, a small leather purse, and, for my birthday, a real fur collar for my coat. At first I had thought he was trying to be fair to us because he had chosen Annabel and not me, but then, one day, when I led him into the lounge, he lifted his fingers to my face and ran them all around my cheeks and my forehead and into my hair. I stood still as a stone as he moved them down my neck and along my shoulders, and by the time I heard Annabel coming down the stairs, I was half faint with wanting him to go on.

I opened the box and found a silver charm bracelet there, with three charms hanging from it—a pair of scissors, a mirror, and a bicycle. He wouldn't have bought it for Annabel because she loved only gold, like a gypsy. She even looked like a gypsy in the bangles and hoop earrings he had given her. "Tell me how she looks in them, Beatrice," he would say. "Tell me how she looked when she sang the habanera."

Other girls could sing the habanera much better than Annabel, everyone knew that. But she was the one they chose to sing it at the City Hall. When she began, with her black eyes and her black hair flashing, even the blind man sat forward. Then he turned to his aunt to ask who she was, and the aunt opened her program and ran her finger down the names.

His fingers were just moving from my cheeks into my hair when Annabel swooped into the lounge. She never seemed to notice what he was doing. She just went to the gramophone as usual, and put on a record. Then she led him to the couch.

"I've been thinking," she said, "If you're going down a road and you turn left, it doesn't matter how hard you want to, you'll never be going right. Isn't that funny?"

I sat opposite them in our father's old armchair. It was fifteen years since he had died, and still the chair held the shape of him, the smell of his pipe. When Annabel asked me what he'd been like as a father—wanting to hear about herself, really, anything I could tell her—I said he'd hardly noticed her, he was that sort of man. I knew Ma wouldn't tell her the truth—that even in the agony of dying, he had smiled at the sight of Annabel. Ma could never stand Annabel's greediness, the way she wanted everyone else's eyes on her wherever she went. It would never be enough, Ma said, never. And now look—any man in the world could stare at her and the husband wouldn't even know the difference. Ha!

They were playing the blind game on the couch, the two of them, his fingertips resting lightly on her throat as she sang. I closed my eyes as usual, trying to join in, but it never worked. Annabel had always made up the games we played, and there was nowhere that I could think of in this one for me.

After they were married, they were to go and live in his house with his aunt. Ma and I could go too if we wanted to, Annabel said. But Ma just laughed at the idea. Every mother in town had wanted that house for her daughter, but Ma could find nothing right about it. It was too dark, she said, and too big, and too full of ghosts. If she had come in while he was playing his blind game with Annabel, or with me, she would have thrown him out right then. But when he was in the house, she never came near.

She went to the kitchen, and stayed there until it was time for lunch.

AFTER LUNCH, he was taking Annabel and Ma to town with his car and driver. Whatever Ma said, Annabel wouldn't hear of taking the tram anymore. "She thinks she's the Queen of Sheba," Ma said. "She thinks she's the Queen of the Castle."

"Beatrice," he said, "won't you come with us?"

I stared at him. Perhaps, if he'd been a normal man, I would have found it easier to talk to him. Sometimes, when I stood at the front window, watching the driver help him out of his car, there were things I could think of saying. But then, when he bent his head to ask one of his questions, I became as silent as he was blind. "Did you make this pudding, Beatrice?" he would say across the table. "Who taught you to cook, Beatrice? Your mother?" And Ma, turning furiously from the sideboard, would say, "She can cook and she can sew, and she's got a head on her shoulders too, I can tell you that."

All morning, Ma had been dressed for the trip to town. She would go there smelling of onions as usual, and, as usual, the saleslady would turn away from her with a little cough. If Ma noticed this, she didn't care. She was proud, prouder even than Annabel. When they walked down the street together, people turned to watch them—a beautiful girl and her proud mother.

He leaned toward me. "But *why* don't you come with us, Beatrice? Don't you want to help Annabel choose the wedding material?"

Annabel laughed. "Beatrice hates choosing things," she said. "She likes to stay home and tidy up. Can you imagine?"

He stretched his hands over his knees. They were large and strong like the paws of the lions at the entrance of City Hall. At night, lying in bed, I would try to remember how they had felt on my skin. But when he wasn't there, it was hard to believe he had ever touched me at all. It was as if I were two people—the one who had stood with him in the lounge, and the one lying in the bed next to Annabel, knowing it was impossible.

His mother had had the money, Ma told us, and just look, it had brought happiness to no one. First, this boy born blind, then another born dead. As for the father—well, he'd had to ask for everything he needed, every coin for every button. What sort of a life was that for a man, she wanted to know? No wonder he took to

women and drink. No wonder he dropped dead either. And then, within a year, the widow went too. So what was left? A blind boy and his aunt? Where was the happiness in that?

*“Lunch!”* she yelled from the dining room.

Annabel got up and walked ahead, leaving him to me. When they were not playing their blind game, she seemed to forget that he couldn’t see. He had to ask her to cut up his chop, or to hand him the salt and pepper. And yet nothing had changed since that first night after the concert in City Hall. If his aunt hadn’t pushed him forward, Annabel wouldn’t have noticed him then either. It would never have happened at all.

“Beatrice,” he said, “would you mind taking me down the passage?”

I was always taking him to the lavatory. I didn’t mind. He never talked to me in the passage, never asked me one of his questions. I would just stand outside the door, waiting. It was as if it was a secret between us—what he was doing in there, and me outside, listening.

This time, though, he stopped halfway down the passage. “I wish I could marry you both, you know, Beatrice,” he said softly.

It was a ridiculous thing to say, and I took my hand from his elbow, wanting to leave him to find his own way to the lav. But I didn’t. I just stood there, wishing I could find the words to tell him that I was proud too, and that if people thought I was jealous of Annabel, well I had never expected what she wanted for her life. Until now, I had never wanted anything that I couldn’t have.

He began to finger his moustache. It was a habit he had whenever he was thinking, holding his finger straight and then moving his lip this way and that along it. “Will you be home by yourself this afternoon?” he said.

I laughed, I couldn’t help it. He was like Annabel, sitting at the dressing table mirror. “How can you be two things at once?” she would say. “Left and right? Here and there? How?”

HALF AN HOUR AFTER they’d left for town, he was back, tapping on the glass of the front door. He didn’t smile when I let him in, didn’t say anything as I led him into the lounge and then stood there, waiting for the game to begin. He just stood there himself with his fists clenched. Then he staggered a bit, groping around for something else to hold onto. When he found my father’s chair, he grasped it from behind as if he thought he might faint.

“I should never have come back,” he said. “I’m not going to stay. Please, Beatrice, take me back to the front door.”

I stared at him. He was moving his head from one side to the other as if searching for me.

*“Please, Beatrice!”* he said. *“Help me! I am foundering in obscenity!”*

I laughed out loud then. I wanted to tell him how Annabel herself laughed at his fancy words, how she laughed at anything she liked about him. “Do you think he smiles in the lav?” she would ask me. “Do you think he smiles when he’s actually doing it?”

“Every night,” he said, “monstrous scenes keep going through my head. I can’t seem to stop them. *Please*, Beatrice—”

“*No!*” I shouted, hearing my voice loud and hoarse between us like a stranger. “Find your own way out!”

He let go of the chair then and began to feel his way across the room toward me. I let him find me, let him grasp me by my arms, pulling me to him, kissing me so fiercely that I could hardly breathe. He was stronger than he looked, and wild now too. He pushed me down onto the carpet and then kneeled over me, groping, pulling at my clothes like a madman. A tram was rattling past, the clock began to roll into the half hour. A giant moth flew out of the curtains and spread itself along the ceiling like a shadow. When this was over, I’d have to go and fetch the broom. I looked up into his face as he heaved and pushed above me. It was loose and careless, nothing like itself. And yet it was as if I had always known how it would look, how this would happen, just like this—so strange and so ordinary that there was hardly a difference between them.

WHEN THEY CAME home from town, Ma was the one who took one look at me and knew exactly what had happened. She didn’t give him a chance to explain, she just chased him out of the house like a thief, with Annabel screaming behind her. Then she locked the door, and we all stood in silence, listening to him call out to his driver to lead him down the steps.

For a month after that no one spoke to me—not Ma and not Annabel. I set about making the wedding dress anyway, working out the pattern on tracing paper on the dining room table. I knew that they were watching me through the glass doors, and that there was nothing they would do to stop me. But then I had to tell them what else had happened—that I was the one he was going to have to marry now, and Annabel could come and live with us if she wanted to.

Annabel herself seemed hardly to notice that she wasn’t the real wife. She still sang and played her records, and had the car and driver to take her wherever she wanted to go. Sometimes, she would put on the wedding dress and sweep down the stairs into the hall, and then I was the one who had to tell him how she looked in it, with the train behind her and her head held high.

He still brought presents for us, silver for me and gold for her. And then, one night, they took up the blind game again. And after that he began to go to her room. Every night he was with one of us or the other, making his way along the passages

by himself. And so we both had his children, and no one in the town would have anything to do with us, although they watched us wherever we went.

In a way, it was just as it had always been, except that I was the one standing in the kitchen now, chopping onions, and Ma could only sit in her wheelchair, staring. Everyone blamed her stroke on me. Still, it was I who knew what she would say if she could—that I was anyone’s fool, working in the kitchen or the sewing room when I could be sitting back, giving orders of my own. If I brushed her hair or wiped the food from her mouth, she screamed so pitifully that the children all came running. They stood around her wheelchair, wanting more. Only Ma seemed to amaze them, the way she bared her teeth for no reason, or clawed at the air as if there was something to hold on to. **N**