

Annabelle Tree

by Carrie Cuinn

The tree grew up around her as she sat at its base, day after day. It had been a sapling when her parents bought the house by the creek, and it made the perfect backrest for Annabelle-the-child. She sat very still, her chubby three-year-old hands clasped together, arms tight around her knees, as her father sat alone on the creek bank. He waited for a fish to appear on his line, and she waited with him.

“I don't want you sitting all day out on the ground,” her momma had said after the second day faded into evening and Annabelle once again walked into the kitchen with a dirty bottom.

“Yes, Momma,” she'd replied quietly as her momma brushed her off with a hand broom and quick, hard strokes. Her momma sighed.

“There's no use. That dress is ruined.” Annabelle was given a hot bath, a cold supper, and sent to bed without a story. She wrapped her arms around Mr. Bunny and listened to her parents' raised voices float up through the floor boards until she fell asleep. The next day Daddy couldn't fish because he had to work on the house, as it was “in no fit state for people to see,” Annabelle's momma had said, and there were church people that wanted to come over for a house warming. Annabelle liked the church people, who'd come over to their old apartment with ambrosia salad and fried chicken and Mrs. Cramble, who wore flower print dresses and had thick, soft arms, would give her great big hugs and

extra helpings on her plate, and Momma never complained. Annabelle followed her Daddy around all afternoon, holding the tin bucket with his hammer and nails in it, and when he needed one or the other, she'd lift it up as high as she could, and he'd reach down into the bucket and take what he needed. Sometimes he'd smile at her too.

As the day got longer, Daddy got to swearing at the way the hammer struck his thumb, or the number of shingles that needed to be nailed back into place, and how slow Annabelle's arms were in getting the heavy bucket up to his waiting hand, so he banished his daughter from further helping. Going back into the house before dark would mean playing alone in her bedroom, and there'd be enough time for that after dinner, so Annabelle meandered through her backyard, getting to know it. There was a pile of rocks near the driveway, all bigger than her hand and rounded. They were gray and sometimes gray with white shot through them, and she took the smallest one she could find and put it in her pocket. There was the stump on the hilly part of the yard, where it rose up before sloping back down to the creek again. She stood on the stump for a while, looking out over the whole of the yard and the creek and the tops of the trees which marked the woods beyond.

"Annabelle!" her momma yelled. Annabelle turned and saw her momma's head peaking out from from an open second-story window. "Get down from there before you fall and break your neck." The little girl quickly scrambled down, scraping her knee in her hurry, and turned back to look at the house. A bit of white lace curtain fluttered out through the still open window, but Momma had already

gone back inside.

Dinner was fried eggs, a piece of bread with a pat of butter on it, and an earful from Momma about how girls didn't play outside in the dirt. Daddy tucked her into bed after her bath, read two pages of "The Little Engine That Could" but didn't finish it. He did kiss her forehead before turning out the light though.

When she was five, Annabelle took that book with her to her first day of Kindergarten and asked the teacher to read it to her. After alphabet time and learning to cut straight lines with rounded scissors, Mrs. Kinney read the whole book, from start to finish, for all the children. Mrs. Kinney looked beautiful while she read, her back straight and tall, and a sweet smile on her face. For two months, Annabelle brought the book back to school with her every day, and wished that Mrs. Kinney were her momma too. Finally, her teacher sighed, and handed the book back without opening it.

"I'm happy to read another book, if you want to bring it in sweetheart, but we've read this one enough." She smiled a little, and Annabelle put "The Little Engine" back into her schoolbag which had been a gift from Mrs. Cramble and the church people. For the rest of the year Mrs. Kinney read other children's books, and Annabelle tried to be happy with the momma she already had.

After school, when the weather was good, she would take the only book she owned down to the sitting tree, wiggle her butt into the growing crack at its base, and read to the tree. She tried to make it sound like Mrs. Kinney had, and did a happy voice and a sad voice and what she was

pretty sure were engine noises. The tree didn't complain, anyway. Its thin branches swayed in the breeze, the creek babbled gently, and the plucky train engine made it over the hill. When she was seven, her momma taught her to sew. It was the first time that Annabelle had been allowed to touch a sewing needle, on account of how sharp they were and how bad it was to get into Momma's things, so she was very careful.

“You can't expect me to keep mending your clothes just because you don't want to be a proper lady,” her Momma had said. “No, take it out and do it again. It has to be straight or people will think I haven't taught you properly.” She shook her head, and Annabelle slowly plucked her almost-straight stitches back out again. “It's a shame what you do to your clothes,” her Momma said, referring to the rip she'd gotten this afternoon from where Mabel and Meredith had pushed her into a fence on the walk home from school.

“Weirdo,” Mabel had said, and “Cheap trash,” Meredith had said. Annabelle said nothing. She did get a lot of practice at sewing all that fall, on account of second grade being the year that girls decided who was worth knowing and who wasn't, and Annabelle was on the side of not worth knowing according to the rest of the girls at her school. She sat at the base of her tree, which was wider and taller by then, and had gotten enough leaves to actually notice when they fell. She could see the leaves piling up when she looked at it out her window, after her Momma decided it was too cold to be playing outside anymore that year. Storms and snow would be coming soon enough.

“Daddy, won't the tree get cold?” Annabelle asked. Her

father, who'd been sitting in his chair, the orange one at the edge of the living room that she wasn't allowed to play on, for all the hours it had been since dinner time, looked up from his paper. It seemed to take a moment for him to remember who she was, and she waited quietly while it came to him.

"Oh, Annabelle," he said. "What was it you were saying?"

"I was wondering if the tree would get cold, the way we do, since it's coming on Winter and all." She tried not to fidget, though her bare feet were cold on the hardwood floor, so she didn't distract him from an answer.

"Hmm," he replied slowly. "Maybe it does. I'm not really sure." He nodded at her then, and went back to his reading.

That night, Annabelle snuck out and gathered up as many leaves as she could, and ran back into the house.

Three days later, her Momma yelled for her.

"Annabelle you get down here right this minute!" her Momma had said. And Annabelle hurried down the stairs, still half-dressed from getting ready for school.

"Yes, Momma?" she asked.

"You want to tell me why that tree out there has a whole net of leaves all sewn onto it?" her Momma asked. Annabelle didn't really want to tell her but there was no getting out of it.

"Daddy said the tree might get cold," she replied, hoping her Daddy would in fact remember that he'd said something like that. "I made a string of all the leaves and wrapped up the tree in it, like we do with cranberries at Christmas." She smiled at that, pretty proud of herself for

remembering something her Momma actually liked making. The older woman frowned, and Annabelle's smile faded away.

From then on, the tree would have to take the risk of freezing through the winter, since the cost of thread was too much for her Momma to allow on anything other than sewing up tears and missing buttons and hemming pants which needed to be let out to be long enough the way *that child* – always Annabelle – kept growing. Momma had cracked a wooden spoon using it too many times on Annabelle's butt over that, and the time that she'd tied a too-small sweater around it's base when the snow started to fall, and the time when she was nine and she saved up her babysitting money to buy the tree its own scarf, one Momma couldn't get mad about. She did anyway, but at last Annabelle had started not to care.

When she was twelve, Annabelle's Momma was pregnant again.

She'd known something was wrong from the way her Momma had been crying for a few months, in between getting the flu a whole bunch of times, and Daddy took more shifts at the plant and in between sat down by the creek bed, not even pretending to fish. The cool water flowing over his submerged six-pack kept the bottles cold, and it was hard to hear Momma yelling from all the way up at the house. Annabelle didn't mind her Daddy sharing her hideaway spot, nestled into the curve of her tree, and he didn't mind her being there either, mostly since he didn't notice. She read her books, borrowed from the middle school library, and he drank his beer, and the tree's thick

branches moved a little in the breeze.

“Your hair’s turning green,” Jerrod Miller had told her at recess, one day in October. “Is that for Halloween?”

“It is not,” she said back, and walked away from him. But she went straight to the girl’s bathroom, and ignoring the heavy sighs and pouty faces of the girls putting on their makeup at the far end of the row of mirrors, Annabelle pulled a strands of her normally light brown hair and held them up to the light. It wasn’t much, but Jerrod was right – mixed in with all the brown were bits of green.

“You’re a freak, you know that?” one of the girls said.

“Yes, I know,” Annabelle replied, and left.

By November the green hair, a pale green like washed river rocks or clover in the sunlight, had grown in streaks big enough to be noticed, and Annabelle had to get cleverer about how she did her hair in the mornings. Her parents, busy with their own lives and the soon-to-be-born baby, would never notice, but a teacher might, and that would end with a note home, and that couldn’t be ignored. She stood in front of her bathroom mirror, tying her hair into braids, when rain began to fall heavily on the window. It seemed to come straight at the house instead of falling from the sky, and the sunlight disappeared.

Downstairs she could hear her mother yelling again.

Another minute satisfied her that no one would notice her grass-colored hair today.

The rain began to pound like a stranger knocking on neighbor’s door, in heavy thumps, water mixing solidly with the rising wind.

Annabelle’s father began to yell too.

Opening the bathroom door, she could hear metal cans hitting the kitchen floor and the muffled voice of a radio announcer saying something she couldn't make out. Her heart beating faster, Annabelle ran toward the stairs.

Outside, a dark, rumbling noise grew louder.

She got to the kitchen just as her parents, her father with a bag over one shoulder and a flashlight in his hand, made their way out the back door. She followed them, watching as they hurried out of the house, into the darkness. On the back porch Annabelle could see the storm as it rushed toward them, spread out to fill the whole sky. The sun was gone, the day was gone, silence was gone.

Her parents, too, were gone. She turned in time to see her father's arm pull shut the storm cellar door.

The wind rose, pulling at her clothes, her hair, undoing her braids. She threw her arm up to cover her face as the shingles, always loose, started to pull away from the roof. Grass and small branches, pulled from the woods beyond the creek, began to hit her, raining against the house.

It's a tornado, she said, the sound pulled from her throat so that she couldn't hear her own words but she felt her lips moving when she said them.

Tornado.

The wooden door to the cellar flapped against the concrete, a heavy sound. Smack. Smack. The wood groaned as the wind tore through it, straight toward the house. She looked out and saw the black sky, the empty yard, and the faint outline of her tree.

Annabelle ran.

Unable to see, hands shielding her face, she watched her

feet cross familiar terrain until she fell against the strong, smooth bark of the tree. She wrapped her arms around it, barely able to grasp her own hands on the other side.

The monster roared.

Tree, she said, the shape of the word on her voiceless lips.

Her hair, brown and green – a leaf green, she suddenly decided – floated out in all directions as the wind rushed toward them.

Annabelle, the tree said, without a mouth, without sound, and the tornado struck.

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