

Learning through 'Story'

Annie presents as a resident who relies heavily on visualizing in her mind a past rich with the recollections of a loving home, a lost love, her dispossessed heirlooms, and her formidable accomplishments as a teacher/writer. Because of major physical limitations that has her bed ridden, Annie appears to have few quality experiences outside of a vivid memory - which may or may not be her only recourse . . . from what: utter privation of dignity, lack of privacy, excruciating pain? All these considerations provide caregivers the opportunity to 'read between the lines,' and become more informed through Annie's story.

Annie's Story....

"Never published"

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The few things that Annie had chosen to keep when she closed her home and left it for the last time had occupied the unfriendly corners of her room at Lakewood Manor.

She had chosen each item with care, knowing that her space was limited. But each one carried a reminder of who she was. Each one held a memory. The dreamy child, the determined young woman, the compassionate teacher, the established author. Each one lived on in the aura of these objects.

Annie could resurrect them by concentrating on the memories they contained. But now they were gone. "Stolen," Annie thought.

"New policy," they had explained over two years ago when she was placed. "All personal items must be put in storage. Safety hazard. And it's too much work for housekeeping to clean around... You don't need this stuff anyway, Annie," they had commiserated. "We provide you with everything you need." And so they packed her things like corpses in great plastic caskets and removed them.

Annie's head ached. For two days now she struggled in her mind to recover

her things. Slowly they returned to her - the small wooden rocker with the squeak, the last remnant of her farm childhood; the delicate china tea set from her mother when she purchased her first home; the scrapbook bulging with writings, newspaper clippings and letters, mementoes of former students. These were most precious to her, but something eluded her still. Something had not yet been returned.

In her mind, Annie sat in the old rocker and tried to think. The gentle movement of the rockers and the familiar rhythmic squeak soothed her. She was in the farm kitchen of her childhood home, watching as her mother prepared supper, absorbing the aromas, lost in the mental composition.

Annie seemed to live in a world quite separate from that of her pragmatic mother. She was absent-minded and given to reverie, and had become the brunt of family jokes.

Tiny and less robust than her four older brothers and sister, she was a bit pampered and was not expected to carry as much work and responsibility. Just the same, she was a point of frustration

for her hard working farm parents and an enigma to her siblings.

Annie loved solitude. She spent many hours alone in her room composing stories and poems, or walking alone through the pastures and woods.

The kitchen was warm. Mother had the fire in the cookstove blazing. Potatoes bubbled on a pot on the top of the stove. A roast of pork and pineapple upside-down cake darkened and caramelized in the oven. The rich mingled aromas caused Annie to shiver in delight. A feeling of warmth began in her gut and ascended, filling her chest, expanding her heart. She was home. Home - the wonderful, affirming connotations of that word: Love, security, acceptance, sustenance, freedom to be. "Time to get you washed and dressed, Annie."

Annie's eyes flashed open as she was suddenly jerked onto her back, the bedclothes whipped to the foot of the bed. She shivered, exposed.

One nursing assistant wiped her face and hands with a warm damp cloth while a second rubbed at her arm pits perfunctorily, sprayed antiperspirant and detached the adhesive strips on

her incontinent pad. They cleaned her bottom, front and back, and rolling her from side to side maneuvered a clean pad, stretched it up between her legs and snapped on the adhesive tabs.

Annie knew the drill. Her startled reaction was replaced with a kind of detachment. Much like a victim of violent trauma, she put herself in limbo, protecting herself from the humiliation.

They pulled clothing over her arms, one of her beautiful dresses, but mutilated, slit up the back with velcro fasteners applied to ease the dressing.

Annie's wardrobe was distinctly feminine, tiny flower prints with peter pan collars and fine lace trim. While other ladies were resplendent in their fleecy jogging pants and sweaters, Annie always wore a dress, or skirt and blouse.

Another roll side to the side, a canvas sling was positioned under her. The attendants attached straps from the sling to a mechanical lift. "Let's go for a ride, Annie. Just relax," one attendant said.

Annie's bottom swung free of the bed. She turned dizzily in the air, like in a carnival ride, before she was lowered into a wheel chair. The procedure always turned her stomach. She had never gotten used to it.

Sitting upright in her chair, her ablutions continued as one of the attendants arranged her hair. It was pure white, thin and fine, and long enough to be secured into a knot at the back. She had always worn it long and preferred it to be loose around her shoulders. But now the nursing staff kept it pulled back and twisted into a bun to keep it from matting against her pillowcase. They all complained about Annie's hair and tried to convince her to have it cut short. She was adamant in refusing. In some things she would have control.

The work nearly complete, one of the attendants patted Annie's hand kindly. "You're a little doll, Annie. I wish everyone was as easy to do up as you."

The lightness of Annie's physique, her white hair, her pretty pastel clothing gave her the appearance of an angel. In the depths of her pale blue eyes was

a sense of transcendence beyond the physical. Some of the staff, the busy ones, said that Annie had a blank look that made them feel uncomfortable. But others, the quieter ones who pondered their own mortality, left her room feeling lighter and less burdened.

Attendants straightened Annie's bed, tidied her room. One patted her hand and said, "Have a nice day," before moving on to the next resident on the list. Annie smiled faintly and tried to nod.

Alone now she could feel the quiet begin to settle around her. She was one of the fortunate ones, she thought. She had a room to herself. How dreadful it would be to have a roommate, to never have solitude, to never be alone with your thoughts. Privacy was at a premium around here. Staff were always bursting in without knocking, and rifling through her closet and bureau drawers to find clothing or other personal items. Annie didn't blame them really. She knew it was necessary to their work and to her care; but it was such an intrusion.

Even her body was no longer her own. Virtual strangers looked at and washed and touched and clothed her most intimate parts. In the middle of the night she would wake to find herself stripped bare, nursing staff washing her and changing her incontinent brief. Necessary, Annie knew, but so humiliating. Such an invasion of her privacy. At least, she did not have to share her room and at this time of day, between being put in her chair and lunch, she could be completely alone.

Now I must try to get back my things, Annie thought. "My rocker, yes, from the farm house. It's there in the corner."

Annie smoothed a starched damask tablecloth over the gleaming wood of her dining room table. She removed two luncheon plates and two cups and saucers from her corner china cabinet and arranged them opposite each other on the table. The vibrant red and green floral pattern of the china, translucent and delicate, looked elegant and rich

on the thick white cloth. The set had belonged to her grandmother, had been passed on to her mother and then on to her. It was a house-warming present.

Annie had just moved into her own home, down payment made with the proceeds from the sale of her first book. Much persistence and hard work had been needed to find a publisher, but it was the first of many collaborative projects with that company. A feeling of pride and accomplishment welled up in Annie's throat as she studied her beautiful table.

She had made sandwiches, egg salad and crab, cut in neat triangles, crusts removed. She had arranged a plate of sweets, short bread cookies, brownies and Breton squares cut small, precise.

Today she was entertaining Mr. Robert Black, her publisher and 'friend,' Annie thought. Their collaboration had been more than productive, as they matched wits and opposing styles. The clashes they had smoothed the rough edges of their differing personalities, eventually allowing them to work together like a well oiled machine.

Robert was arriving just before noon by plane from Toronto. He would rent a car in Fredericton and make the trip up the river valley, arriving mid-afternoon.

The table was set. The food was ready. Annie smiled as she thought of the pleasant afternoon they would spend together, the work they would accomplish, the camaraderie they would share. Robert had sounded eager to see her when he had telephoned.

Annie knew that their relationship was moving beyond collaboration and friendship. She knew that the necessary work could have been done by telephone. It did not require a personal visit.

Then the afternoon was gone, evaporated from existence. In the darkness of late evening, Annie washed her china and placed it carefully back in her corner cupboard. Where it had remained like a shrine until she had removed it to bring with her to Lakeview Manor.

Several hours after Robert had been

expected to arrive, the telephone had rung, startling her into action. An R.C.M.P officer said he regretted to inform her that her friend had been killed in a motor vehicle accident.

It was now mid-afternoon. Room 102 fairly shimmered with heat as the afternoon sun dropped its rays through the west-facing window. Annie, upright in her wheel chair since morning, fidgeted with fatigue. Her bottom was sore, the burning sensation in her buttocks slowly and steadily increasing to numbness. Soon, Annie knew, the afternoon staff would come bursting through her door, boisterous and cheerful, full of the events outside of work, outside of the nursing home walls that snarled their lives together with hers.

"And none too soon," Annie thought, "I'm dying here." A small half-hour past her usual time to go back to bed, insignificant to anyone capable of independent mobility, a painful lifetime to her. Annie stared at her bed, fantasizing the smoothness of the sheets, the firm support under her back and legs, the relief of resting the weight of her head against the pillow.

Granted, the bed could be its own kind of prison. At least she could adjust the position of the head, higher or lower, sitting or recumbent, and gain some variation of position - too weak to turn on her own "Either way, I'm stuck wherever they put me," Annie mused.

There had been editors after Robert. There had not been another love. It was as if the relationship, just beginning to blossom but prematurely dropped, had killed her desire to cultivate that plant. She focused her attention and her love instead on her nieces and nephews, her students and her protégés. She had been content. Her memories of her one love now rested in her china tea set.

Annie adjusted her position minutely in her bed. The rubberized draw sheet under her rib cage had a crease and she felt as though she was lying on a

boulder. She knew that she would have to endure the annoying discomfort until it was time for the staff to reposition her. "I'll go through my scrapbook," she thought, "It will occupy my mind."

Annie flipped open the stiff cover of her ring binder. The binder was stuffed with newspaper clippings, hand-written letters and cards, typed pages of verse and prose, and Hilroy loose leaf covered with large childish scrawl. She carefully turned the pages. This was her life's work, the evidence of years of teaching. Her influence lived on in the lives and careers of her young protégés.

Here was a clipping from the *Telegraph Journal*, March 7, 1963. It reported that Marshall Jenkins had been awarded first prize in the Governor-General's Essay Contest. In the accompanying picture, Marshall receiving his prize looked proud but confused as though he wasn't sure how this had happened. Marshall was a tall boy, full grown at sixteen. He had begun in Annie's grade 11 English class in September, 1962, shy and awkward, unsure of himself. He was not an exceptional student. His academic career was average. Certainly he was not university material. His future path was predetermined. He would learn motor mechanics and work along side his father at the family service station. There was no money or motivation for higher education. But he could do worse in life. His future, if not illustrious, would be secure.

Annie chuckled when she thought of the disruption that Marshall had brought to his family and their circumscribed existence. She could still empathize with their confusion and disorientation as Marshall's dreams and self-expectations grew beyond anything his family could have imagined.

Even though Marshall was in the non-academic stream, or "shop" option, he needed English to graduate, and Annie's class had been on his time-table.

When Miss Annie Mays encouraged her class to turn their hand to poetry, Marshall was eager to try. Even in his

first amateurish attempts, Annie could see potential. She gave him extra reading, critiqued his poetry and essays with an expert sensibility and demanded from him daily writing.

When the call came for submissions to the Governor-General's essay contest, she knew that Marshall's writing would be strong. His essay, "*The Canada I Know*," painted a portrait of rural New Brunswick life so vivid that readers felt they had been there. It was no surprise to Annie when his essay won first prize.

Marshall - and his family - were surprised and not completely pleased. Miss Mays had opened a whole New World of possibility to him, a world in which he had found it possible to succeed. It was a world, however, that was foreign and frightening to his family, and which he would have to discover on his own. He would be the first in his family to go to university, the first to leave their rural community, the first to travel into the wider world.

In her mind, Annie turned the pages of her scrapbook. Newspaper clippings chronicled Marshall's literary career, from his first book of poetry to his appointment as writer-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick.

Turning pages in her mind, Annie remembered other students from her many years of teaching, students who left school to become mothers and entrepreneurs and community leaders. She had tried to open them to their own creativity, to the possibility within them. As reflected in her scrapbook, many of them had responded.

"My life has been worthwhile," Annie thought, "I have done what I was meant to do." She closed the scrap book and placed it back on the shelf.

A faint click-click sound caught Annie's attention. She could sense someone in the room with her and she opened her eyes to see her friend Morley smiling down at her. Morley shared a double room three doors down.

"Sorry," Morley said, "I didn't mean to wake you." Annie shook her head from

side to side. She hadn't been sleeping. Even if she had been, Morley's presence was never an intrusion.

He patted her hand companionably and leaned down to kiss her forehead. He knew he was taking a chance with that demonstration of affection. Relationships between the old people were always viewed with suspicion, if not revulsion, by the Manor staff.

Annie cherished Morley's visits. She had infrequent company and Morley kept her in touch with the world. In Morley's presence she felt like a real person, a peer. To the nurses and aides, her most frequent companions, she felt less than a person, more a duty of care.

Morley kissed her again, lightly on the cheek this time, before taking his leave. Annie sensed a feeling of contentment flooding her chest. "In spite of it all, life is good," Annie thought. "I did in life just what I wanted to do. I accepted challenges and was open to adventures. I took from life and I gave back."

Annie felt suddenly over-whelmed with fatigue. This time when she closed her eyes she dropped into a deep sleep.

An hour later she woke abruptly when the head of her bed was raised to a sitting position. "Time for your supper, Annie," a voice chirped. Her over-bed table was wheeled in front of her and a tray of food slid briskly onto it.

Annie surveyed her meal - a bowl of corn chowder, creamy and thick, a slice of home-made raisin brown bread, a molasses cookie, a little crumbly and dry, and a cup of black tea.

Annie never felt much like eating any more. She had left her appetite in her cozy little house on Forest Street where every meal was a feast - a feast served on china.

Annie reached for her spoon, easing her fingers around the thick melamine handle. Her hands felt like blocks of wood, awkward and stiff. She raised the spoon to her mouth. A thin line of yellow milk slid down her chin. The chowder was lukewarm and bland.

She dropped her spoon on her tray. Her

appetite had vaporized with that one bite. She pushed the tray away, reached for the remote control to lower her head, closed her eyes and sighed deeply. "They won't like it when they see that I've eaten nothing," she thought.

Annie tried to roll onto her side. Her spine was beginning to ache as it usually did this time of day. They would bring her medications soon, morphine and a sleeping pill. She had little time left to recover her missing possessions before she fell into a medicated stupor. One last item was missing and she must try to get it back. But what was it?

Annie struggled to make her mind work. She felt so tired. The pain in her back picked at her concentration.

The sun suddenly disappeared behind a cloud. Annie pulled the blankets a little more tightly around her shoulders and her mind pulled her through the little porch and into the kitchen of the old white house.

The old floorboards under spotless oilcloth creaked a welcome as Annie stepped into the room. She made her way to a narrow cot that occupied the opposite corner and sat down. She had spent many winter afternoons right here, reading while her mother prepared supper, getting up from time to time to set the table or stir a pot.

Warmth flooded through Annie's old veins. The fire, the aroma of fresh bread, the familiar creak of the floor . . . she was home again. It was almost like she

had never left.

"I must write this," Annie thought, "I must capture this on paper. It must not be lost." The urgency of putting it all on paper consumed her. And then it was done, her life poured into words, the manuscript complete. The pages recorded her dearest memories, interpretations of her growing-up years, descriptions of the people she knew so well with all their quirks and mannerisms preserved on paper. This story she had birthed would carry on her legacy as surely as a son.

Annie was awake now and alert. 'Never Published,' was packed away in a Rubbermaid tote in a musty basement storage room. "Fit only for disposal, as I will be," Annie thought.

She looked around her room filled with institutional furniture: a dresser, a bedside table, a hospital bed. A generic room. It had been stripped of her personality. Except for the hand-made quilt that remained on her bed, there was nothing here that spoke of Annie Mays.

Soon all trace of her would be gone. Soon another body would occupy this bed, would endure the night-time washes, would push down the bland food. Someone different, but the same. Would anyone notice?

"Your bedtime pills, Annie." Three pills dropped into her mouth, a gush of water. Annie closed her eyes and longed for sleep. ■

Questions for reflection

Readers are encouraged to reflect and create their own questions about Annie's life as a nursing home resident. Several have been suggested for consideration:

1. Nursing staff refer to Annie as "a little doll". What words do you think Annie would use to describe herself?
2. How could caregivers use knowledge of Annie's life to individualize her care?
3. Annie's relationship with Morley is an important part of her life. How would the relationship between Annie and Morley be viewed by the staff in your facility? How could staff create a sense of community and connectedness within the nursing home?
4. Why was it so important to Annie to recapture her belongings? How does the physical environment of residents contribute to their quality of life?
5. Individual dignity is an underlying theme of "Annie's Story." How well did resident care staff respect and support Annie's dignity? ■

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