

ANNIES CHASE

by sara t.

Annie remembers what its like to be poor. Heck, she still is poor. But that wasn't the issue. She could deal with poor. She still had her imagination. She still had her talents. She wasn't really poor. She believed as long as she had love and hope she was actually wealthy. And she wasn't wrong about that. Not at all. Being poor wasn't a crime. Being poor had its reasons and its excuses. Some were valid. Others weren't. But that didn't concern her. She could forgive her father for living in a world of his unfulfilled dreams. She could forgive him for his slovenly work habits believing he was too good to work a 9-5 job. She could understand what it's like to feel your potential untapped and unappreciated. Oh yes. Annie could even forgive her mother for not having the sense to use birth control because of archaic religious rules that had nothing to do with her and were imposed by men. She could forgive her mother for not knowing how to say no to her husband when he moved toward her in the night. Annie understood all this. She understood human frailty, human aspirations, human passions and obsessions. Hadn't she been frighteningly human on more occasions than one? Hadn't she made the wrong choices, said the wrong things, thought the wrong way and paid dearly for those mistakes? Yes, without a doubt, Annie, was no stranger to the trials of life. But for the life of her she could never understand the indifference of her mother towards her in a moment that made her feel unloved and unprotected for all her existence. And many years later her mothers indifference, in a moment of horror and terror for Annie, was no longer a shock. It wasn't even a thought. Annie knew from a young age, from the first indifference, that she was alone. Utterly and completely alone. She would have to fight in this life for her own existence. There would be no one, ever, to do it for her.

Annie remembers clearly the smell of that classroom, the look and taste of it. Thirty little cruel girls, as cruel as only girls can be, sitting in rows of five. Chalk dust always floated in the air and a reply from President Ronald Reagan to the class letter hung proudly on the back board. A faint smell of rotting oranges and lead pencils mixed with smelly feet and laundry detergent seemed to be part of the structure of the classroom, holding it up with its determination. The air to Annie always seemed to be full of malicious intent. Annie always felt small and apart from the girls around her. She always felt that they had some secret knowledge about life that she was strangely missing. It bewildered her, their confidence, their assurance that they were deserving of all the joy of life. It wasn't that Annie had no joy. Annie could laugh along with the best of them. She could even amuse herself and take pride in her small achievements. Annie could play and discover, fight with her siblings and cry when hurt. She wasn't a stunted child. But she always knew that she lacked something that everyone else had. She just couldn't figure out what that elusive thing was. Annie would stalk that elusive thing her entire life sometimes finding it, sometimes thinking she found it, and sometimes surprisingly it found her. But in the classroom on that particular day Annie was a target for not having it. It began when a girl said to her "You cant play with us because you are poor. Look there's a hole in your tights." Annie was ashamed. But she thought, what has that got to do with anything? Oh what folly! Even little girls understand the power of status and social class and they used it to elevate or denigrate, which ever was advantageous in that particular situation.

Shortly, the other girls joined in the taunting and started chasing her around the classroom, pulling her dress. Annie was frightened as the girls started getting more

physical and when one girl pulled her hair and pinched her until it hurt Annie felt big salty tears plopping out of her eyes and onto the ground. Annie was so humiliated as

everyone watched her with fascination and satisfaction shining in their eyes. Never had Annie felt more alone and confused than at that moment. There was only one thing to do. One thing that made any kind of sense in this whirl of fear and hurt. Annie turned on her feet and fled out the door of the classroom. She felt the eyes of the pack on her back as she continued running blinded by tears out of the school building and up the block to where she lived. Home to her mother. Annie wanted to fling herself at her mother and curl up in her arms and stay there until she stopped trembling. But Annie didn't do that. That was not how she knew to be. Her mother looked up from whatever she was doing and said "Annie what are you doing here" in an annoyed tone. Gulping for air Annie spilled her story in pieces telling her mother how a girl had hit her, pinched her and torn her dress. Annie was crying bitterly now, her whole body shaking with the memory of the violence she had just escaped and the fear that engulfed her. Her mother looked at her and said "That's what you came home for? Go back to school now!" Her mother may as well have been part of the pack. She may as well have slapped her and pinched her and torn her dress as well. Annie didn't know until many years later that she should have gotten a hug, a caress, an assurance of " I will take care of this". Maybe a tissue to dry her tears from her eyes and snot from her nose. All she knew was that whatever she wasn't getting felt like a slap. Her mother was part of the wolf pack and Annie was alone. Annie knew then what she was missing that the other girls had. She didn't know that she knew it. Because she didn't know the word or the concept existed. As an adult she knew she had been missing Love, but then as a child she only knew the absence of love which was loneliness. And like animals with an extra sense of smell, children can sense the unwanted, the unloved, the uncared for. And that's why she was a target that day. She would be a target all her life. The unloved are noticed by their eyes. Eyes that devour hungrily, eyes that are open to the world in a certain innocence because they don't know what they deserve. They only know that they are lacking. And it is this lack that makes them vulnerable to prey. When someone is loved

they know they are deserving human beings. When someone is hated at least they know they exist. But when someone is treated with indifference, like Annie was by her mother and subsequently others, you start to doubt your own existence. After all if nobody loves you and nobody hates you, do you exist at all? You may as well be invisible. That's why some people turn to crime and mischief. To be seen. And that's why some people chase love like a drug, to be seen. Annie was the latter type. That's why being poor didn't bother Annie. Not in the least bit. Annie made being poor into an Art. She reveled in it and it became part of her identity. She prided herself in shunning designer clothes (not that she could afford it). Annie knew how to dress looking like a million dollars with a budget of fifty. Annie's home was furnished with other people's cast offs. Furniture found in the street or in other people's garages and basements. You see it wasn't money or objects that Annie was after. It was always Love she chased. That ever elusive mysterious thing that kept slipping from her grasp. But she would be damned if she didn't try holding on to it with both hands and her entire will when she found it.

