

ANNABELLE'S ANGEL

First published in *The Fiddlehead*

– You must be Sven. It's good to meet you in the flesh, so to speak, says Eric, my new client. But then, once I'm inside the door, he won't look me in the eye.

– I only do this part time, I'm a web site designer actually, I say, which is a line I use if I think someone needs to believe they're not really paying for sex. If I was honest I'd have to admit I say it for myself too. It's probably a male thing, I doubt a woman escort, or her trick, would be in denial about conducting the oldest business transaction in the world.

– Eric hasn't told me much. Although he was quick to tell me he was e-mailing me for his wife. You'd be amazed the number of times I get hired for someone else: a boyfriend for a girlfriend, or the other way round. It's not unusual to get sent to a hotel by a corporation that wants to keep an out-of-town client happy. I've even had secretaries hire me for bosses who were too chicken to call me themselves.

Eric's condo is humongous. High ceilings, so spacious it makes me feel small even though I'm six-feet-two-inches and muscled, solid as a steak-laden steer. It's genetic, my big bones are the only things my Swedish-born father ever gave me — when he walked out for good he left more empty space than I could have ever imagined.

Eric lowers himself onto a hulking white couch floating like a lonely iceberg on a sea of aquamarine carpet that stretches from walls to windows of the vast living room. So much glass I have the sensation I'm hovering over English Bay, I can see creamy whitecaps glistening in early evening sunlight. On the opposite shore chimneys and rooftops poke through gold leafed treetops in Kitsilano, but a mass of vegetation hides the U.B.C. campus. I wonder if it's too late to charge Eric a higher rate.

Eric found me through the Internet. Thank the Lord for e-commerce! The best part about Internet is e-mail. Even those too shy to talk on the phone will ask anything in an e-mail. Eric wrote me through a site called Annabelle's Angels. So I figured the story about him wanting me for his wife was probably true, because it's usually women who book me through Annabelle. Annabelle's Angels is a bit hokey but Wayne — he's Annabelle — says women need romantic fantasy, shining knights on white horses, that kind of stuff. Wayne posts nude soft-focus photos on blue-sky backgrounds of all the guys wearing white-feathered wings. He takes out the wings' straps and retouches everybody to make us look like real angels; he didn't have much to do where I was concerned. Here's what Wayne, I mean Annabelle, says about me:

I am sure you will find Sven an incredible guide on your transcendent journey

from innermost dream to fantastic reality.

To soar with Sven you need only bring your true self and the flight is sure to be supreme.

– So, Eric, what do you have in mind? I glance around to indicate that I don't see any wife. But so he won't feel embarrassed if there turns out not to be one, I give him a good smile.

I have the best smile. I paid enough for it. Ten years ago when I drifted into Vancouver I was missing a couple of front teeth and my molars were crumbling, the result of beatings and a bad diet. But being blonde and 14-year-old I was good enough for any dirty old man who stopped his car at the curb. I could soon afford my own place — I'm not good at sharing — and it wasn't long until I saved enough to have my teeth fixed. Then I had my lips plumped up. I doubt I really needed it; but the surgical bee sting dispelled any paranoia I had of looking as mean around the mouth as my father.

I was skeptical about Annabelle's Angels but the site's is working out great because most women from Annabelle's just want the straight goods. Some kissing, maybe a bit of oral sex, but mainly a good pounding — very vanilla. It's a break from being Jurgen on Man-2-Man, where I do mostly domination stuff for gay men, which is physically demanding, but it pays well.

– Is there something special? I ask Eric.

I sit down on the sofa which reminds me of an altar cloth, unstained and unruffled. Unlikely to be where the action takes place, but, having lived in a home run by priests for a year or so, nothing would surprise me. Eric looks to be in his mid-fifties, blue eyes, receding salt-and-pepper hair, tanned legs with a cluster of broken veins on his thigh like purple coral peeking out from under his khaki shorts. He and I traded e-mails but his were always vague, but business-like at the same time.

Dear Sven, I'm contacting you on behalf of my wife. We saw your photo on Annabelle's

Angels web site, could you please tell me your rates?

Hi, and thanks for the inquiry. My rates vary depending on your requirements from \$250 for

the straightforward stuff and up to \$500 for anything more complicated. Plus cab fare. What

do you have in mind? Sven.

Dear Sven, your rates are fine. I wonder if you'd be available for an hour or so this Thursday

evening at 7:30? Eric.

In an attempt to squeeze out of Eric what he and/or his wife wanted I replied:

Hi Eric! Yes I'm free this Thursday. Would you or your wife like me to wear anything special?

Should I shower? Maybe drink a lot of liquids? And I'd like a phone number in case I get

lost. Sven.

Dear Sven, wear whatever you like. A shower would be a good idea. It's not necessary to drink

a lot of liquids.

Eric added his phone number and an address on Beach Avenue but nothing else. I was a little uneasy, maybe he was a psycho. You can usually tell from a person's voice if there's anything to worry about, but these days, with e-mail, you rarely talk to clients. Lately I've considered leaving word, addresses and phone numbers of my appointments, just in case. I once e-mailed details to Wayne at Annabelle's Angels. I've never actually met Wayne, just talked on the phone or through e-mail, but, apart from clients, he's the only person I've had anything to do with for years. When Social Services took me away from my mother and her pervert boyfriend I swore I'd never be dependent on anyone again. Wayne e-mailed me back instantly saying never to send him 'incriminating' information. I tried to feel better by telling myself that — even if I had someone — by the time they realized I'd disappeared it'd be too late anyway.

– My wife, Valerie, is in the bedroom, says Eric finally looking me in the eyes. – I'd like you to have sex with her. His eyes have an expression in them, a hint of pleading, a touch of hurt, as if he's fully expecting me to say no, like a bum begging for change and resenting it. I'm a bit freaked when I realize his eyes remind me of my own. Same color of blue, maybe.

– Cool, I say, trying to be reassuring but also figuring that Eric's likely to have a decent-looking wife. And I'm now fairly sure it's just the straight goods these two want, no kinky stuff.

– She's into it, I presume? I ask, because it can be tough, coaxing along somebody's unwilling partner.

– Yes, we were quite the swingers in the '70s, says Eric. He gives me a wry smile; I can't help but warm to him.

– Will you be taking part, I ask, trying to keep it businesslike, – or maybe you prefer to watch?

– We've discussed it and the idea is that I initiate things and then you join in. Valerie would like to meet you first, just to be sure. If we're at all doubtful you won't mind if we call it off?

– God, no, I say, feeling so relieved he isn't pushing her into it that I almost forget to mention that if they cancel I need half of the \$250 fee.

– Fine, says Eric. I follow him down a beige-carpeted corridor lined with paintings, mostly abstract stuff, hellish colors to my way of thinking, but they all shout money. I'm not usually keen on repeats — people start to get the idea you're their friend — but I find myself hoping Eric and his wife can be a regular thing.

It'd definitely be better than going to Toronto, which I tried a few months ago. I thought I measured up pretty good against Toronto escorts I'd seen on the net so I rented an apartment for a month, smaller than my living room for twice the rent. It's crazy there, everybody e-mails at 1:00 a.m. and wants you instantly. Sure, some clients have fancy apartments on Bay Street, even big houses in Rosedale, but they treat you like scum if you can't perform right away and they maul you to death if you can. I meet a lot of self-hating screw-ups here in Vancouver but at least they keep it to themselves. Torontonians couldn't care less. It seems like the city is full of snotty women, bitchy men, and bickering couples who don't care if people know they loathe each other. I was glad to get back to Vancouver. People leave you alone here.

Eric stops at one of the paneled doors, gleaming with high-quality paint and a brass handle.

– Just wait here a second, he says and disappears into the room. I hear low voices and then Eric calls, – Come on in, Sven.

I can't believe a king-sized; Valerie is extremely cool. She's propped up on plump white pillows in the middle of a luxury bed, wearing a long white T-shirt, her knees together, smooth legs, pale but not pasty, drawn up a little, smiling. You can tell from the folds in her neck she's around fifty-years-old but you'd never know it from her face, smooth as mine apart from a couple of laugh lines. Her shoulder-length hair is straight and full, color of a gleaming chestnut.

– Very pleased to meet you, Valerie, I say making myself comfortable right away, sitting on the other side of the bed from Eric, who's holding her hand. It's always best, once you know the script, to appear confident. People find it reassuring.

– Hi, says Valerie, smiling a little uncertainly.

– You have very beautiful hair, I say. I'm actually thinking how amazing the room is, the setting sun filters through flimsy sheers that cover a wall of windows to the west, everything is bathed in golden light.

– May I? I ask, lifting my hand to Valerie's head.

– Sure, she says.

As I slowly stroke her hair she looks at Eric, who raises his eyebrows inquiringly. She smiles and I feel, more than see, a slight nod of her head.

Eric stands up and in one fluid movement pulls his shirt over his head. He's in good shape, thin, but with tight abdominals and muscled arms.

– So Sven, if it's all right with you we'd like you to watch for a while and we'll let you know when we need you, says Eric. He sounds thoughtful, even concerned, but something about his expression makes me think perhaps it isn't me he's trying to reassure.

– Cool, I say. I slip off my sneakers and pull off my T-shirt. I take Eric's example and leave on my athletic shorts until things develop

– Nice color, have you been away? Valerie asks.

– Tanning salon.

– Isn't that awfully bad for your skin? And goddamn if there isn't a look of concern in her eyes that reminds me of my mother on one of her rare good days when she was sober.

I force myself to smile and try not to look at Valerie's face. I glance up at Eric hoping to jump-start him. He takes the hint, lies down on the bed the other side of Valerie, takes her chin in his hand and turns her face to meet his. Her expression from concern to adoration.

He kisses her on her mouth. I fix my eyes on Valerie's legs, which she's now stretching out, rubbing her knees slightly together. I try not to think of my mother. Usually I'd urge a couple on, talk dirty, be provocative, but with these two it doesn't seem appropriate. Eric and Valerie kiss for a long time, Valerie is very attractive, Eric is very handsome, squeezing and caressing. Eventually he slowly lifts Valerie's arms above her head. Valerie holds her hands high like a trusting kid as Eric peels off her T-shirt and her hair swings back into place. They continue to kiss. I try to focus on Valerie's breasts or the neat triangle of her pubic hair to stop myself from looking around to see if there are any family photos on the chest of drawers. I can't help wondering if they have children.

Eric and Valerie are perfect together, as synchronized as champion dancers. Eric leads and Valerie responds. The words 'making love' pop into my head. I find myself glancing around again, looking for clues to Valerie and Eric's life. Eric startles me when, without taking his attention from Valerie, he takes her hand and places it on my thigh. Valerie responds by stroking my leg. I have to try real hard to stop thinking about Valerie and Eric — as parents, as companions, as people — and concentrate on the job at hand.

After Eric gives Valerie a particularly tender kiss, cradling her face in his hands, he moves aside and lies face down on the bed looking away, toward the wall of windows that are now glowing pink from the last rays of the sun filtering through the sheers. He keeps hold of Valerie's free hand. I figure this must be my cue. I whip off my shorts and slide a condom out of the pocket. I've got the condom thing down to about four seconds, any longer and things can fall flat. Mission accomplished, I'm reaching for Valerie when Eric lets out a muffled sob.

I freeze, not sure if I've heard right, but then there's another sob, louder than the first. Valerie reacts like she's been electrocuted. She jumps over Eric and in a split second is squatting on the floor next to him. She strokes his hair and kisses his head and says, – it's OK, it's OK, over and over again. As I pick up my clothes I notice the last sliver of pink light disappearing from the window. I've heard a lot of bawling but I never heard a guy — adult or child — hurting as much as Eric. When he catches his breath he manages to blurt out – I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

I can't get out of the room fast enough.

When I come out of the powder room, Valerie is standing in the hallway dressed in a white, terry-cloth robe and clutching a black, Valerie purse under her arm. There's a pot light directly above her, it casts deep shadows under her eyes.

– We're very sorry, she says.

– No problem, I say, praying she'll just pay me so I can leave.

– Eric had a prostate operation six months ago. She says, Valerie would be fine. He's always taken such good care of himself, always been so virile, but...

– You don't have to explain, I say, glancing towards the front door.

– They say Eric's problem might be psychosomatic, she says. – We tried Viagra, but it made no difference. Then an old friend was here the other night. After a few drinks he was getting a bit fresh. I've never found him attractive but afterwards Eric said he felt excited at the idea of a third person. I wonder now if he wasn't just being kind. Anyway we thought we'd try someone young and handsome. It didn't seem that big a deal compared to what we used to get into. Oh, God, she moans. – What were we thinking?

My body twitches, things to fold itself around her, rock her to sleep.

– There must be long you can do, toys and games and stuff? I say, before I can help myself.

– We've tried, but nothing feels right. Maybe you know of something. Maybe you could help.

I wish to hell Valerie would stop wringing her hands. I'm close to tears, which scares the shit out of me. I daren't look her in the eyes so I stare at her purse.

– Look lady, I'm a hustler, not a friggin' sex therapist, I say.

It couldn't have hurt her — or myself — more if I'd punched her. Her hands drop to her sides, her black leather purse hits the floor like a slaughtered animal. I feel a brief lightning flash of triumph, but then the old emptiness seeps into me. For just a split second its icy familiarity is reassuring.

When she hands me the full \$250 plus \$40 for cab fare I'm not about to argue even though by rights she should only pay for a cancellation.

– Bye, then, I say.

– Good-bye, Sven, she says and closes the door.

And suddenly I want to scream but the cry back in, but I feel like I'm paralyzed, like when you shout out in a nightmare but the cry gets strangled in your throat. I struggle to push back under the surface of my memory a picture of me kicking and pounding on some other door — one that never opened — but it's like trying to keep a rubber ball underwater, the memory of the door that never opened pops up again, stronger than ever. So I walk away.

I can't look at myself in the mirrored walls of the elevator. I stare at the ceiling and try telling myself that things can turn to shit no matter how much money people have, hoping I'll feel better in the smug way my mother always did when she learned in the National Enquirer about mishaps of the rich and famous.

On Beach Avenue the respectable sidewalks and velvety lawns are shadowy now that the sun has set. I hear water slapping against wet shingle along the shoreline. As I look around for a cab I start thinking maybe I should go back to Toronto — the people I met there were easier to hate.

