

1.

We met Saysel for the first time when she was seventeen and tried to walk into the lake on a field trip. (The teachers, alarmed, had reported it to us.) She had her mousey hair cut short, wore a sweatshirt from an arts camp, and had a dry cough that made our office staff wince in sympathy.

She sat in a gray chair in our meeting room and twisted her legs around its supports. "I don't think I'm quite human," she said.

Dr. Marner took off his glasses and polished them. "You don't?" he said mildly.

I was just a new employee, intern actually, not even properly graduated from high school yet. One of my teachers had gotten me an opportunity to work under Dr. Marner. This was my first chance to really get in at the start of any of these cases. It wasn't as though we had any great number of them. *Working in Cryptopsychology is boring as gasoline dripping*, the saying went, *unless someone puts a match to it.*

"In fact, I'm not sure I'm human at all," said the girl.

"What's your name?" Dr. Marner asked. Formality only. We had her file.

"Saysel Feske." She tacked on the long *e* at the end defiantly.

"Your file tells us you're seventeen. Can you tell me a little about your childhood?" Dr. Marner's fingers were poised over the keyboard of his computer. Being a lowly youngest intern, I only had a clipboard until a loaner laptop became available. Funds were tight.

Saysel put her head back, jerked forward to cough into her sweatshirt shoulder, and then leaned all the way down till her elbows rested on her knees. "I was born in Traverse City, up north," she said. "When I was five I ran out into the lake and didn't come up for twenty minutes."

I felt my eyebrows go up.

"I wasn't drowning," said Saysel. "I was having a lovely time. It was as though I didn't have to breathe at all. There were things down there, beautiful things – like dark horses with long flowing manes, and misty people white as clouds, and they spoke to me." She smiled, showing crooked white teeth. "We lived right up on the lake shore, you see. Mom didn't know I was outside. She came looking for me, but I was out of the water by that time. I proved I could swim, pretty soon after, but it was hard to get down and find the lake people again because Mom kept watching me for a while."

My personal theory was brain damage brought on by suffocation. She'd dreamed the whole business, poor girl, and somehow regained consciousness before her mother found her. For all that

Dr. Marner's impassive face showed, there might be a record of such an incident on her file. We of the Cryptopsycology Department knew perfectly well that there was a sensible explanation for nearly everything. In fact, Dr. Marner himself had taught me an excellent aphorism for it: *Assume the probable before the improbable, and the improbable before the inconceivable.* He also usually went on to say, *and the inconceivable has been known, at that point, to be found to be conceivable,* but that wasn't my favorite part of it. I preferred to think of myself as the future Dr. Ian McAdams, extending the flame of truth into the darkness of superstition, exposing confusion to wither in the cold light of reality.

Yes, before you ask, I have been called an idealist.

Saysel, her fingers tangled in the belt loops of her jeans, was chattering on to Dr. Marner about her various experiences. "...And I got so horrible-feeling in the city with no lake, so as soon as they took us to one I went right into it, and that was what the teachers got upset about."

It came out that she'd been sent to a boarding school here in Flint when she was thirteen, after her parents' divorce, her doubtlessly colossal tuition preferable to both of them over actually having to keep her around the house. She'd missed the beach and Lake Michigan horribly, mainly for the fact that she had "friends there" and could stay under the water for whole afternoons without any trouble.

She started coughing again around that point, and I handed her a cup of water from the dispenser. Her hand had an oddly cold, clammy feel to it as my fingers touched hers.

"How long have you had that cough, and have you ever had a doctor diagnose a cause for it?" Dr. Marner asked.

Saysel nodded her head, not trusting her voice apparently yet. A moment later, she answered, "I've always had it. It's idiopathic, they've told me. I got checked out again a year back, but they never said anything more."

Dr. Marner turned to me. "Ian, why don't you get a new pen instead of that horrible one you're using?" He gestured to the cup of pens on his desk.

Uncertain, since my pen was writing well enough, I got up and moved over to fetch one. He nonchalantly highlighted a portion of the document on his computer screen – the file we'd gotten forwarded from her school's medical staff – and made eye contact with me for a moment. I glanced over and tried not to let my shock show on my face. Returning to my seat, I hid my face behind the clipboard to hide any lingering expression.

"It's gotten worse recently, though," Saysel volunteered uncertainly. She fluffed the muddy-colored hair at her forehead with the fingers of her right hand. "Anyway, I wanted to make sure you know I wasn't insane or anything. They sent me to a regular psychologist before they sent me to you."

"Did you ever explain to your parents about your... experiences with water?"

She shook her head. "They weren't – interested."

I'd learned from Dr. Marner about the messy marital issues that had been brewing since Saysel's childhood and the vicious divorce settlement that took years to finish, so I wasn't surprised. The Feskes hadn't been thinking about their daughter for quite a long time.

We chatted to her; she chatted back; we made a follow-up appointment for that Saturday, three days from then. She laughed and dimpled at Dr. Marner's jokes and bantered with me about cafeteria food. Then she left, slinging her leather purse over her shoulder and good-naturedly refusing a cough drop from the receptionist, who was a veteran and knew how to deal with everything from hallucinating men who thought they could call down lightning to women who believed they could sense ghosts.

In the meeting room, I met Dr. Marner's eyes. The question in mine must have been apparent. "It's technically something for the doctors to tell her, not us," he said.

"But she should have been told earlier," I said. "I mean, isn't there a legal responsibility to inform people of these things?"

Dr. Marner pushed his chair back. "The parents know, the school knows. I intend to tell her this Saturday."

At my lunch break I stared out through the window in the stairwell, numbly watching the Flint skyline, too shaken to eat. It was bad enough that she was probably brain-damaged and hallucinatory. But how did you tell a girl my age that she was going to die, that her lungs were basically wearing out and dissolving? Dr. Marner was right. That shouldn't have to be our business. Saysel was so alive, so... happy, even in her confused way.

She took the news excellently, closed-mouthed and dry-eyed. "I've expected that for a while, actually," she said, quietly, at the end. "The people in the lake said it might happen."

We didn't meet for very long that day. She was willing to talk, but somehow I found that I wasn't, and Dr. Marner was mostly concerned with scheduling her appointment at the neurologist. So we parted for then.

2.

Nothing new came of Saysel's case for a while. Her scans didn't show any brain damage, I did learn, but by then we had new patients to work with. I tried not to think any more of the bright girl who dreamed of underwater worlds. But the sight of a lakeshore in the country, of a girl with short hair, even of the shape of the top of my clipboard, would remind me of her.

The school she was at called us five months later, when I was working at the office with Dr. Marner after my own classes were done. Saysel wanted to talk with us, they said.

I hardly recognized her. She'd grown her hair out long enough to pull it clumsily back from a face that was now little more than skin stretched sharply over bone. Her eyes watered and blinked, and she coughed almost constantly, into cupped hands with cracked, dry skin and standing-out veins. But she smiled at us as we came in and found her trying to amuse the betta fish in Dr. Marner's vase.

"I want you to take me to Lake Michigan," she said, hoarsely. "I tell the people at school I need to go, but they don't have anyone to drive me. I'm eighteen now. You can take me, can't you? Drive me to Traverse City and let me go in. Just for a little while at least."

Dr. Marner was dubious. We had no official power to do so. We weren't therapists.

"Please," said Saysel, the word rattling in her throat. "I think it'd make me better."

Dr. Marner said it wasn't our place.

I walked her out to the waiting room and, on the way, whispered for her to slip away, to wait for me at the bus terminal at 5:30.

"You'll take me there, Ian? To the lake?" she whispered, cocking her ruined face up towards mine, excitement shining in her eyes.

"I have no official power to do so," I said, quoting Dr. Marner straight-faced. "I'm not a therapist, and it's not my place." I grinned. "But I'll do it anyway."

We rode buses, criss-crossing from city to city, and then took a taxi from the last bus stop. Heaven only knows what the driver thought of our exploit. We came into Traverse City at sunset, tired and hungry and dirty, a pair of eighteen-year-olds on a mission.

We walked after that. I hadn't been to Traverse City for a while, not since I was a little boy and my family had gone up for weekends there. Saysel kept flitting back and forth, wavering between lingering by remembered places and pulling desperately ahead for the lakeshore. Her hollow, frequent coughing reminded me to hurry.

The beach was nearly deserted as dusk came on. We crossed the ringing, vibrating metal catwalk over the street and wound our way onto the sands. Saysel only waited long enough to take off her sweatshirt and battered sneakers before running into the waves.

Her head, hair dark and slick with water, surfaced a moment later. I had only to look at her face to see the change in it, the color returning to her cheeks and the light to her eyes. "Don't worry, Ian," she said, cocky and cheerful as always. "I'm going to go down for a while, but I'll be okay."

I opened my mouth to say something, but she was out of sight before I could manage it. She stayed out of sight. I stared at my watch as the minutes ticked by. A growing panic threatened to choke me. Vague visions of my future as the intern who'd let a patient drown filled my mind. I'd lose my position with Dr. Marner for sure, and that would only be the start of it...

Then, just when I was about to give up hope and call the police, Saysel came up, blowing water and laughing. She wasn't alone, either. There was something next to her, something misty and insubstantial, yet somehow visible in the dying sunlight. A woman clothed in a flowing dress the color of dark water, her hair tangling in the foam on the waves.

I rubbed at my eyes. I still saw it, whatever it was.

...And the inconceivable has been known, at that point, to be found to be conceivable.

"This is Synory," said Saysel, on her knees in the water, her wet black tee-shirt clinging and wrinkled. "Synory, this is Ian."

The apparition reached out long, misty fingers towards me. I wondered what I was supposed to do. I set down my backpack and stepped forward, uncertain. Tentatively, crouching within the reach of the lake tide that hissed around my shoes, I held out my hand. Fingers touched, warm human to cold, insubstantial other. I felt as though I ought to have been afraid, but I wasn't.

A high, distant singing lodged deep inside my ears. Saysel grabbed my arm and pulled me further into the waves. I tried to protest that I wasn't like them, that I'd drown, that she'd forgotten

my essential humanity in the delight of her inhumanity, but then as I lost the stony lake bottom beneath my feet I felt something else sweep up underneath me. I found my hands tangled in silky hair, my legs astride a wet, ever-moving body. A slick horse's head broke through the waves.

"This is Raven," said Saysel, floating along next to me. "He's a kelpie. We've been friends for a while." She patted the dark neck of the animal. I felt it cautiously. It was more leathery than hairy, more like sealskin would be than horse-hide.

We cut V's in the cold water as we swam. My feet were numb, and Raven's mane blew in my face as I buried my hands in it. We passed the buoys, going further and further out, towards the mouth of the bay. Synory and Saysel were splashing each other. Another couple of dark shapes cut the water, kelpies like Raven as far as I could tell.

I gave up trying to explain it and just *felt* it.

I, Ian McAdams, eighteen-year-old boy accepted at the University of Michigan for a major in Biology and a minor in Psychology, rode a kelpie into the waves of Lake Michigan alongside a pair of water folk.

I still dream about it sometimes.

3.

We hiked back to the cab station, dripping wet, at midnight. Saysel couldn't stop laughing and flicking drops of lakewater from her hair into my face. The manager at the front desk took a single look at us and shook his head.

By some miracle my backpack had been left untouched on the sands (all right, officially the beach had been closed by the time we'd gotten there, so no one had been around to steal it). I was able to show him cash enough to convince him we had some means of payment. Though still suspicious, he agreed. Saysel fell asleep on the ride back to the bus station, and then again on every bus.

We reached Flint in a liquid gold dawn. Saysel, her hair looking like it had gone through a clothes dryer, blinked up at me from the bus seat next to me.

"Since you're not human, what are you really?" I asked.

She shrugged and coughed into her hands again. "Something that needs water more than air," she said, "and doesn't know how much longer air is going to work for her. Something that

must've had an ancestor who hadn't started their life on solid land. Something that talks to merfolk and names kelpies."

"It doesn't particularly matter to me, you know," I said. "Just in an academic sort of way, and in the interest of how to take care of you properly." She didn't answer, and I turned towards her, frightened at the silence and the possibilities. "You will be all right now?" I asked anxiously. "You won't..."

Saysel dropped her head sideways, resting her cheek against my shoulder. "I don't know," she said. "I expect I can get through till graduation now, at least. After that..." She sighed softly and edged closer to me. Her voice was small. "I'll graduate and get a lakeshore condo and spend half my days underwater. You can visit me from Ann Arbor on vacations, and I'll catch a kelpie for you and introduce you to the lake people. And..."

Her hair smelled of the lake, and her hand around mine felt ever so slightly wet. "And what?" I asked, maybe a bit hopefully.

"And we'll see what happens after that," she said.