

Deep Water

Now

Rory held onto the “No Wake” buoy, watching the boats in the marina melt and burn at the same time. There’d been popcorn explosions in the last few minutes as the propane tanks on the patio and sailboats cooked off. The entire bay was bathed in flame that howled hundreds of feet into the sky, creating its own hurricane and a roar she could feel in her chest as the surrounding forest was consumed. Ash and live embers whipped across the water, and she knew she couldn’t stay here any longer. The buoy was now almost too hot to hold onto, even at the water-line, and her hair felt like brittle tinder on her head, no matter how many times she ducked her head under. Even the water was warming quickly.

Giselle was tucked into her t-shirt, resting between her small breasts. The little stuffed hedgehog was fully swamped now, though. While she wasn’t much of a drag, Rory wondered whether that might not become a problem later.

But that was something she could put off thinking about. She was very good at contemplative postponements. Right now she had to let go and swim farther out, or die. Deeper water waited for her, as it always had.

Long Ago

She used her key to let herself into the apartment, having successfully avoided the boys in the courtyard once again. She was getting better at it now. Enough hands groping for some parts of her that even she hadn’t fully explored yet told her to find another way, and she had. There was the back stairway, and then the series of potted plants against the railing that would shield her from view below until she was almost to her own door. Thank you nameless neighbor, she thought, for your plants, and not caring at all.

It was dark inside as she pulled the door shut behind her. It would have surprised her if it had been anything else. Her mother had long ago doubled-down on the blinds, and had lined the windows behind with aluminum foil. The a/c was on full blast, and the only thing casting any light was the TV. Her mother’s voice drifted out of the darkness from the sofa above the melodramatic murmurs whispering in sync with the flicker of the television.

“I got you something. It’s on the table.”

Rory felt the excitement that kids feel when a parent has gotten them a gift. She would go and see what it was, that was inevitable. But she knew that any gift would come with many strings. She didn’t even make it to the kitchen table before her mother pulled on the first one.

“I need you to make dinner tonight. Joe’s coming over, so make enough for him, too.”

“Ok, momma.”

She picked the stuffed animal up off the table still littered with breakfast dishes. They held petrified Eggo waffle bits in sticky syrup, drawing flies. She’d have to deal with them later tonight, after her mother and the boyfriend were asleep. Provided he stayed asleep, and didn’t come looking for her.

The toy was cute. It was dark in the apartment, but the light over the range was on. It wasn't much, dim from all the grease. But enough for her to see the tag on it, attached by a plastic loop. It was actually new, not a hand-me-down, or a garage sale find.

Her mother's voice came again.

"No ramen. Do something else."

She responded.

"Ok, mamma. Thank you for the hedge-hog. It's super cute."

"When he gets here, you should go down to the pool for a couple hours, or whatever."

She knew that there was only one way for her to do that. If her friend Tiff was there, she'd be ok. Tiff was a kind of a mouse, and not much fun to play with, but both her parents were pool-side when she was. They didn't like Rory, but she understood that they wanted to think they were good people, so they never went so far as to tell her to go away and leave their daughter alone. They just paid careful attention. That was good if the boys were there, or the creep from 205. She'd be safe enough until they left. Then she'd need to follow them out.

If they weren't there, then there was always the roof. It was usually pretty safe, and she could look out at the city lights. She answered her mother.

"Ok, mamma."

There was no response from the living room except the sound of the TV. She tucked the stuffed animal into her shirt for the first of a thousand times, and tried to figure out what to make for dinner.

Before Now

The woman who'd pulled over in response to her road-side thumb up was unusual.

It was mostly guys that stopped. The condition of the car would tell her a bit. Some would see her in advance, then slow, pulling over with no hurry not far ahead and wait. Others would brake farther down the road, then reverse. The difference also told her another bit.

She would walk up to the passenger side window, and wait for it to drop. Almost always it was power assist, but sometimes they'd reach across for the hand crank. Piece by piece, she had information about the next ride even before they opened their mouths. A lot of times, she could tell the bad ones with just these bits, and a first look. Then she'd run in the opposite direction and leave the road. Almost always that was enough. They might shout or curse, and a few would get out, but mostly they just went on down the road.

The woman was somewhere in between on the pulling over, and had just waited in the middle bit that men didn't without backing up.

As she reached the passenger side window and it retreated down into the door, she and the woman locked eyes. Rory knew immediately that this wasn't going to be any version of her usual next step on the road.

"Do you want a ride?"

The woman was older, maybe in her fifties. The car was modest, and so were her clothes. Smooth jazz played quietly on the stereo within the car. Rory had reached a point early on in her travels where she could decide in the moment whether a ride was worth the risk, and this met most of the criteria.

"Yes, please. Thank you."

She opened the door and climbed in after shifting her pack from her shoulders. She held it on her lap as she waited for the woman to issue the seat-belt mandate. She didn't, so Rory didn't. She placed it at her feet as the woman pulled back out onto the road.

There was silence for a while, which was also unusual. Men liked to engage right away. You know, start building that bridge that would hopefully get them what they wanted as soon as possible. And these were the ones she opted to chance a lift with, not the ones she fled at first contact.

Of the ones she didn't pass on, most were tentative, and could be diverted. But then you had the clever ones, the ones who could hide who they were in the short moment she had to decide on taking the ride or not. *They* were the ones she had to consider herself lucky if she could plea-bargain down from a full sexual assault to a just a hand-job, or a blow-job. Being on the road alone almost always demanded some form of payment, no matter how hard she tried to game it.

The woman finally spoke through the generic syncopation wafting from the speakers.

"My name is Evelyn."

"Alicia." Her real name was her own, and she never used it.

"That's a nice name." There was something in Evelyn's voice that said she knew it was a fake, but that it was fine with her. Rory started to relax, but only a very little. It was clear this wasn't the first time the woman had given this ride to someone like her.

"Are you thirsty? I've got water if you are." She indicated two plastic bottles in the console cup-holders. One was open already, but the one closest to Rory still had the cap on, not that that was a sure thing, though.

Rory was actually very thirsty, but this was a little difficult. She decided to take a chance. She took the un-opened one and twisted the cap, testing it. It resisted as it should, and then released as the safety ring let go below the cap. It was the best evidence she was likely to get. She drained half the bottle, and then burped quietly.

"Thank you, Evelyn."

"It would appear I was saving it for you." She hesitated, as if weighing whether to go on, but then did.

"Are you ok? This can't be a very safe way for you to travel."

Rory had scripts for these conversations.

"Yes. Just trying to get home. My car died a while back, I didn't have the money to fix it, and it wasn't worth fixing, anyway."

The woman just nodded, as though agreeing. Her next question was one Rory could have easily answered with the same script but for some reason, she didn't. Or couldn't.

"Nobody at home to help you, though?"

She turned to look at Evelyn in the half-light of the instrument panel. The older woman was looking at the road ahead, but Rory had the sense that she was really focused on her. Then Evelyn answered her own question with another one.

"There is no home, is there?"

The truth left Rory's lips without her permission.

"No."

Her heart-rate increased. She didn't make this kind of mistake. Ever.

Evelyn sighed. The sound seemed to be full of sadness, not judgment. She nodded to herself again.

"I'm sorry, Alicia."

There was silence for a while. Then Evelyn spoke again.

"Do you mind if I talk at you for a bit, or do you want to be left alone? I trust you'll let me know when I've taken you as far as you want to go."

"It's your car, Evelyn. Do what you want. I'm going farther than you are so drop me wherever."

This got a look from the older woman, but it wasn't one of reproach or indignation. Instead, Evelyn smiled at her, and then turned back to the road unfolding in front of them both. She sounded somehow younger than before when she responded.

"Thank you. I've only one really good story, and it's rare that I get to tell it to someone who might understand. Feel free to stop me if you tire of it."

Rory didn't know what to make of the statement, but no alarm bells were sounding. In fact, she was starting to feel almost comfortable. And that made her feel uncomfortable. She settled for background repetition of her escape mantra as Evelyn started to speak again, because a ride was a ride, whatever the kook in the driver's seat was like.

Door-lock button, door-latch, shoulder to it and out, moving or not. Repeat.

"There was once a young girl. She was conceived without permission, and born into a cold place where the star that was meant to warm her didn't. It glittered in its own light, and instead drew what little warmth the young girl had towards itself in an effort to make itself shine brighter.

The girl yielded her warmth across many years hoping the star would be satisfied and maybe return some eventually. But the star always wanted more, and eventually cursed the girl.

'What good are you? Have you nothing else to give me? Begone!'

Then the girl was cast out, and the star disappeared."

Evelyn's voice was soft and even, but there was something else in it that was familiar to Rory. Her mantra was lost as she tried to figure out what it was. It remained just out of reach as Evelyn continued. There was a part of Rory that thought this was probably one of the weirdest experiences she'd ever had. I mean, story-time with Evelyn? What the fuck *was* this?

But most of her was listening attentively.

"The girl floated away into darkness. There were other lights that came and went as she drifted through, none of them as bright. Some of them gave off a bit of warmth at first, and she swam around them to take what she could get, but they always dimmed after a time. Then, they would recede or wink out, leaving her alone again.

Time passed, and the girl was no longer young. She had long tired of swimming through the dark, and the little warmth she'd received along her journey was so long departed that her bones didn't even remember it. There was only the cold, and her moving through it.

She thought that maybe she should stop swimming. She was exhausted, and there were no more lights anywhere that she could see."

Rory got it, then. What else there was in Evelyn's voice. It was so familiar because it was like her reflection in a mirror.

She hadn't cried since she was ten. Fifteen years populated by some pretty bad shit had passed since then, and not a tear. She could feel them, but clamped down. She *refused*.

Evelyn looked over at her, and Rory knew for the first time that the woman could really *see* her. That scared her, but the only thing written on Evelyn's face was kindness.

"I can stop, my dear. It's a good story, but it's a hard one. I understand that. I *am* getting to the good part, though."

Rory stared back at her until Evelyn had to return her attention to the road ahead. She didn't answer the woman right away, eventually looking forward herself. But then she decided. She wouldn't ask for it, but she'd listen.

"It's your car."

Evelyn resumed without any commentary.

"The woman the girl had become was ready to stop, because she knew cold and dark will claim everything with nothing to oppose them. But the young girl inside the woman didn't want to go quite yet. They struck up a conversation as they waited, treading water in that lightless place.

The little girl went first.

'What if it's just over there, just past where we can't see yet?'

'It never is, though.'

'Maybe if we shout, it will hear us, and come.'

'It won't.'

'How do you know? We never shouted. We never asked. We just kept swimming in silence.'

The woman considered this. She didn't believe it was worth it, but the girl did. Why not?

She stopped swimming, but before the black water closed over her head she screamed,

'HELP ME! PLEASE! Help me.'

The last two words were a whisper into bubbles rising above her head."

Rory felt frantic in her need to ward off what felt like an impending emotional apocalypse, but then Evelyn modulated her voice, and what came next brought her back down, though not all the way.

"But then, Alicia, the sun rose. A *real* star, so bright it banished the cold and dark in an instant, and the woman then stood on solid ground. She was warm for the first time, and she knew the little girl inside had been right."

Rory stayed silent for a while at the end of Evelyn's mind-fuck narrative, juggling the remainder of emotions still bouncing around inside her. She finally got everything locked down, or so she thought. Evelyn didn't say anything after finishing either, just piloted the car down the road as the miles spooled out.

About an hour later, they reached the outskirts of a small town, and Evelyn spoke up.

"This is me. Do you want me to drop you at the bus station? Or you can stay with me if you want to. I do have a second bedroom."

Rory could now hear herself quite clearly in the woman's voice, and knew what Evelyn already knew. She would never take an offer like this up. Rory was kinder in her response than she normally was when someone offered this to her. Once again, tears pushed towards the surface, but it was easier this time to put them down.

"Thank you, Evelyn. Here is fine. I appreciate the ride. You've been very kind."

Evelyn nodded, and pulled to the side of the road. Rory opened the passenger door, and started to slide out when Evelyn stopped her.

"Wait. At least take another water bottle. Please."

She fetched another one from behind the passenger seat and slipped it into a pocket on Rory's pack, after fussing with the Velcro latch for a few seconds. She smiled at Rory once it was stowed.

"Safe travel, dear one."

Rory was about to turn into the growing dark at the roadside, but stopped. She bent back down to look at Evelyn through the open door, suddenly needing to know for sure.

Evelyn raised her eyebrows in question. Rory spoke.

"It was you."

Evelyn smiled her kind smile.

"Yes, of course it was. I told you because I knew you'd know."

Rory put the last bit out, knowing she knew this too. She was equal parts angry, and hungry for the answer.

"And the *real* star. That's somebody, too."

Evelyn nodded.

"Yes."

"I've heard this shit before, you know. From old men that wanted me to sit in their lap while they told me about him just so they could feel me up. From young fire-brands who wanted to fuck me as hard as they wanted to convert me. I could go on."

Evelyn just looked back at her, but a tear slid down one cheek while she did. Her voice was still soft when she answered, though.

"Yes. The girl did too. And the woman later. You haven't met Him yet, but I think you will. I do hope so."

Rory let the anger take over, because it was the easiest reaction.

"I doubt that very much."

She turned away, slamming the door behind her. She started down the road once more, and a few minutes later, Evelyn's car passed her, red tail-lights disappearing around a bend in the road not far ahead. As they winked out and the dark started to press in, her anger leached out of her and she was left with a despondency she knew well. A line from Evelyn's story echoed in her head.

There was only the cold, and her moving through it.

It was at least an hour later, no traffic on the road translating directly to no rides when she fished out the water bottle Evelyn had put in her pack.

She also found the two folded twenties tucked in there as well.

The money made it even easier not to cry. That's what people did. For the takers, it was to get what they wanted, making it a transaction instead of a taking. Or, for the givers, they finally realized that they couldn't fix her, and it was an easy way to think they'd done all they could.

She tried to let the whole experience slide out of her mind, like tipping trash off of a dine-in tray. It usually worked.

It was just another ride.

She waited for it to go, but it never did.

Now

The shore-line before her burned for as far as she could see from side to side, as did the hillsides leading down to it. The two-lane road threading in between them wasn't even visible. She had escaped the clutching hands of one death to trade that for this. It had been...what? Maybe a couple hours? She didn't know.

She let go of the buoy, turned away, and started swimming. The light cast by the fire behind illuminated the hopelessness that lay ahead. The lake stretched away ahead of her, the far shore only a suggestion where the reflection of light stopped, and absorption began. There was an island to the south, and closer, but only in the way that one celestial measurement was smaller than another.

All she could taste was bitterness, resentment, and ash. When she felt like this, the conversation in her head was always with Evelyn, now.

Well, I'm warm, Evelyn, but I'm pretty sure this isn't the real star. Guess you were wrong.

But Evelyn wasn't here to reply. Only her story was.

How do you know? We never shouted. We never asked. We just kept swimming in silence.

She swam slowly, conserving her energy though she didn't see the benefit. Giselle bounced slightly between her boobs, held in place next to her heart by her t-shirt. She thought about what it would mean to let the little stuffed hedge-hog go, to cast that part of herself aside. Giselle was her only remaining anchor in the past. It was the only warmth *her* first star had ever given her. It was...symbolic. Wasn't it?

... And the little warmth she'd received along her journey was so long departed that her bones didn't even remember it.

Shut up, Evelyn.

But Evelyn was right, really. She wasn't warm. While her face and shoulders felt sun-burned, the farther from shore she got the colder the rest of her felt. And the darkness of the water grew.

Long Ago

She was just finishing the last of her small portion of the dinner she'd made when she heard a key slide into the front door lock. Rory set the coffee cup she'd been eating out of down on the table, knowing it was time for her to leave.

The door opened and Joe stepped through, momentarily back-lit by the evening sky. He closed the door behind him, seeing her as she stood up. He greeted her in his deep, rumbly voice.

"Hey, shrimp. How ya doin'?"

"Hi, Joe. Ok."

He was a big man, wide and full of muscles. He was very scary, with the tattoos on his neck and arms, and his shaved head. She was reaching for the wadded-up beach towel next to her. She'd pulled it from the dirty laundry basket while changing into her bathing suit. Joe spoke again.

"What's wrong with your shirt?"

She was puzzled for a second, but then reached in and pulled Giselle out, holding the stuffed animal up in the dim light. She'd named the toy while cooking hot dogs and mac n cheese, choosing it from one of the few storybooks she owned, about a French princess.

"Momma got her for me."

He nodded in disinterest, eyes shifting from her to the stove.

"Some of this shit for me?"

She nodded, but he was already moving towards the cupboards to look for a clean bowl. She knew he wouldn't find one, and thought it was a good time to run for it, or she'd get stuck doing dishes for them, too. She grabbed her key and the towel and went for the door.

From out of the living room, she heard her mother.

"Joe, honey, bring me some, too. My show's almost over."

The door closed behind her on Joe's response.

"How 'bout you get your fat ass up and get it y--."

She headed toward the pool, which was in the next section of apartments over. She knew she could take the first breezeway across to the other side, and not have to pass by 205, which was on her side of the building. That guy rarely came out, but why take the chance. She hooked a right onto it, and walked along the poolside railing, looking down to see who was there. There were maybe ten people altogether lounging around or in the heavily-chlorinated water, and luckily for her, Tiff and her parents were among them. She was safe, for a while at least. She let herself relax a bit as she descended the stairs to the ground floor.

Tiff's parents saw her coming, and she saw the momentary distaste flicker on both their faces before they pasted those fake smiles on. She didn't care, and waved at them anyway. Tiff's mother waved in response as Rory stripped off her t-shirt, buried her key and Giselle in her towel, and dumped it all onto an empty lounge-chair. She made a bee-line toward Tiff, who was holding onto the edge of the pool in the shallow end, her hair plastered against her head and her dumb and fearful brown eyes just above the tile at the edge.

Rory greeted her while in the air above her head, drawing her legs up and grabbing her ankles into a cannon-ball.

"Hey, Tiff."

Then she splashed down into the water, hoping that she'd scared Tiff and her parents just enough for it to show up, but not have any consequences. It was always a fine line, but one worth walking, she thought.

She spent the next however long trying to coax Tiff to follow her into the deep end, as the sky overhead moved into full dark. The pool lights came on, as well as the dim security lamps above the walkways in front of the apartments. Every time she got her to move towards it even a little, one of her parents would cast their caution towards the two of them.

"Not past the five, Tiffany."

They were relentless, and eventually Rory gave up, and went herself. She dove down, and then held onto the circular grate above the pool drain.

She loved being underwater. She didn't have to carry any weight, and the sounds she had to listen to were very quiet versions of whatever they were up above. All she had to do to be there was hold her breath until she couldn't anymore.

Then she would rocket to the surface, take in more air, and return as fast as she could. She had tried to explain this to Tiff once, but like in so many other things, the other girl had just stared at her in confusion.

"But, it's scary down there."

She wished she could meet someone, just once, who understood.
Understood anything.

She'd lost track of how many trips to the surface she'd made, but now with fingers once again entwined between the metal slats of the grate, she twitched when the pool lights went out.

Before Now

Her latest ride had started well enough. The man was skinny and older, with thinning hair and square glasses, and had seemed to give her only a cursory glance when she stuck her head in the open passenger window. He even turned back towards the windshield, rather than staring overlong at her. It was dismissive, but sometimes that was good.

"Let's go, if you're going."

She thanked him, her creep-o-meter barely spiking at all as she opened the door and slid onto the seat of the pickup. She did the backpack dance, and soon they were moving through the late-afternoon sun along the two-lane highway. He didn't hassle her about the seat-belt, though he wore his own, so she had that one less step in the escape mantra.

Deep forest scrolled by in varied shades of green, and the wind through the open windows smelled like an evergreen candle. She could see the beginnings of a lake ahead, just glints off the water through the trees at first.

He didn't engage right away, though. That should've been her first hint, but she'd had back-to-back-to-back rides with guys that just left her alone, and dropped her as soon as she had indicated it was time. She couldn't remember a more trouble-free streak, ever. How soon the edge was dulled.

When he did finally, she knew she had made a *huge* mistake. He went from silent chauffeur to an existential threat in one statement as he turned to look at her for the first time since picking her up.

"You know, this is your last ride."

It was more the dead tone in his voice that hit her harder than the content. It was matter-of-fact meets inevitable. She was at DEFCON one in the space between two heartbeats.

He made it clearer, even. The worst part was that his logic seemed to almost make sense.

"I wish you hadn't been there, but you were. You're next, that's all it is. It isn't personal."

She had maybe two seconds to think before what happened next happened. It was Evelyn, of course.

Maybe if we shout, it will hear us, and come.

Rory had her instant to respond, and she did. It was familiar, somehow.

Help me.

The big buck came out of nowhere, intersecting with the front of the truck in a single leap from the uphill side of the road. The man had been slowing, probably in anticipation of pulling off the road to do what he had ordained. The deer was mid-leap, and hit the front of the hood right where its legs met its body.

There was nowhere else for the bulk of it to go but along the hood, and straight into the windshield. Rory ducked down, free of restraint, but the man could not. She felt the mass of the deer enter the cab above her even as the truck started to slew to the right, and begin the tumble.

Then the world twisted around her, and she was lost to the sound and fury of it.

Long Ago

She shot to the surface, heart racing. Wiping the water from her eyes as she broke the surface of the pool, she knew she'd not paid enough attention, and now there would be a price to pay.

Everyone was gone, and the pool was dark. The only illumination came from the security lights along the walkways.

Then she saw him walk into the dim light cast by those same lights, bouncing off the water. Every kid in the complex knew who he was, and what he wanted. He had a lot of names, depending on who was talking about him. She had her own day-time name, "creep in 205", when the sun was up and he was nowhere to be seen.

But in the dark, in her imagination, it was something different.

He was the "Lop-sided Man", and here he came.

"Hi, Rory."

She stared up at him as she treaded water in the middle of the deep end. He stopped at the top of the ladder, putting a hand on each of the chrome-steel handles.

He was big, like Joe, but soft. He had lots of hair. It was long and gross. His head was always tilted down to the right, and his mouth was the worst part of him. The left part was a forever smile, but the right side was a frown. His face was all the things that Rory feared, or hated.

Yet she'd put herself here. This was her fault. She couldn't get out of the pool fast enough anywhere he couldn't get to. All those things she didn't really know about specifically would be what happened now because she hadn't paid close enough attention, and they would all be very bad.

She was too scared even to scream.

She felt something for the first time.

This world didn't want her, and it wasn't anything she could change.

It was at once familiar, and something to question.

How could that be? Was she worth nothing?

"Come with me."

The Lop-sided Man waited, one hand extended.

She put out her request, but not where he could hear it.

Help me.

Before Now

The truck came to rest at the edge of the trees, and Rory thought that a miracle was a cheap way to describe it. She was fine in a way that made no sense based on the physics of what had happened, and her outcome seemed in direct conflict with what had actually occurred. The man was dead, crushed by the deer, and the truck was a crumpled mess. She could smell blood and gasoline.

Yet, her door was open, and she was able to not only slip out from under the deer's body, but drag her pack out as well.

Adrenalin was sparking through her like lightning, though, and she was frantic to get away from this.

She sprinted into the forest, and didn't stop running for a very long time.

Long Ago

From above, she heard a voice as she stared at the Lop-sided Man's out-stretched hand.

"You've got about fifteen seconds to crawl back into your hole, before I come down there and tear your fucking head off."

She recognized the deep rumble. Both she and the Lop-sided Man looked up to see Joe at the railing of the upper walk-way. The Lop-sided Man stepped back a few paces, but then stopped. Rory looked back in time to see the one smiley side of his mouth creep even higher. His voice was like a girl's, especially compared to Joe, but that only made it scarier.

"You're just a boy-friend. Soon, you'll move on like all the others, and I'll still be here. And so will she." He pointed at her, still treading water in the dark.

"Eight. Seven. Six."

The Lop-sided Man turned and fled.

She swam to the ladder, and hauled herself out. She heard Joe again.

"Get the hell up here, shrimp."

As she grabbed her bundle from the lounge-chair and hurried towards the stair-way, her earlier thought came back.

This world didn't want her.

And the Lop-sided Man was right.

Before Now

When she did stop, she was not far from the shore of the lake. She could see a marina on the other side of this little inlet through the trees as she struggled to regain her breath. Her clothes were soaked through, and even as her breathing began to ease back towards normal she could feel the shakes start.

She shouldered out of her pack, put her back to a tree and sat, waiting for whatever was coming to run its course. The sun began to set across the lake, but the beauty of it was lost on her. She was too exhausted to care. She waited to be filled with emotions, reactions, or memories, the sad brew of her life steeped in this latest horror served up to her in a cracked cup.

But instead, there was only a deep emptiness. She knew she should set up her pup tent, and make preparations for another night to be followed by yet another day in her endless migration to nowhere.

She didn't have it. All she could manage was to liberate Giselle from a pocket on her pack. She clutched the little hedge-hog to her breast, hoping for some echo of warmth from the past to confront the void she faced.

It did not arrive, but sleep did, and that was better.

She dreamed of a water-fall, the cascading water roaring as the weight of it crashed into the pool at its feet. She expected to feel cool, standing at its edge, but the mist cast into the air was hot and dry. As she watched, the water in the pool began to boil, and more heat rose into the air.

Rory awoke with a start, registering the orange glow behind her eye-lids an instant before they flew open.

Fire was everywhere, and wind screamed through the burning trees.

She reacted from somewhere primal, and was on her feet even as her skin began to cry out in pain. Her pack forgotten, the only thing she carried with her was Giselle, and only because she'd been clutching the stuffed animal already. She sprinted for the water even as fire crowned ahead of her in the tree canopy.

She broke out of the trees and made it across the sliver of beach even as the pain approached unbearable.

She dove in, and the black water closed over her.

It granted this one relief, but she knew even then it was not her friend. As she swam underwater for as long as she could, she remembered the lights in the pool going out, and the Lop-sided Man, all those years ago.

...and I'll still be here. And so will she.

There was also the truth that nothing had ever proved wrong.

This world didn't want her.

Now

Rory was near the end. She could feel it. It was one of the few things she *could* feel. So much lake still stood between her and any firm ground that it was now a certainty she was going to drown.

She had stopped swimming even. Now she was just treading water, looking back at the maelstrom throwing immense orange and red fingers into the sky behind her.

Her mind was empty. She decided it was best to make the last break. She reached into her shirt, and pulled out the sodden Giselle. She didn't consider it, and felt nothing as she let her go into the water. She didn't even watch to see what happened to the toy. There was no warmth anywhere.

Into the emptiness, a series of short memories came unbidden, one right after the other.

One.

Her mother.

You should go down to the pool for a couple hours, or whatever.

Ok, mamma.

Two.

Help me.

Joe, standing behind the railing.

Eight, seven, six.

The Lop-sided Man fleeing into the dark.

Three.

Evelyn.

It's a good story, but it's a hard one. I understand that. I am getting to the good part, though.

Four.

The man in the truck.

I wish you hadn't been there, but you were. You're next, that's all it is. It isn't personal.

Help me.

The buck in mid-leap. Crawling out of the truck, unharmed.

Then a thought that wasn't hers was there. She knew it wasn't hers because it was something she had never and would never think.

Who shall separate us?

Even as she considered it, she thought she heard a child speaking from far away.

"Papa! There's a somebody!"

It didn't matter. She knew the answer, and gave it even as she gave everything else up. She knew whose question it was.

"No one."

Then she slipped beneath the water.

Now

When she awoke again, she was lying on the floor of a ski-boat. A man with wild hair and a beard was piloting it. Behind them, the fire still howled into the sky.

Staring down at her was a young girl. Rory could feel the blanket on top of her, and the stirrings of nerves just now warming to the point of recognition. The girl reached down and patted Rory's clammy cheek. Her voice was small in the wind of their flight across the lake, but the words were more warmth into Rory's bones.

"Don't worry. You're saved."

Somehow, Rory knew it was true.

Then the tears came.

