

"Her"

By Liz M Keith

She starred in the mirror as she had done the past few nights. It's gotten worse the past couple of weeks. She usually only did it once a month or week even but it has become a daily ritual as of late. She couldn't help but to feel the consuming pain of the darkness creeping up again. All she could manage to say is, "what have I done? ". Questioning the world for what she had done and why it was done. This time was different though. She stood there staring at her cloudy reflection through the mist covered mirror. She had let the water run this time to make the room hot and to create steam. Cause then she couldn't look directly at herself in the mirror. Even though she couldn't see herself directly due to the mist, she still saw herself and the monster that she had become. She wanted the room to be full of steam and the mirror to be too cloudy to see in because that's how she felt, that's how her thoughts were in her head, that's how her emotions were.

Cloudy.

Even though she wanted to stay there all day she knew that she couldn't. So she finally grabbed her towel and wrapped it around her, shut the water off, and opened the door to leave. As she opened the door she felt the cold blast of the air conditioning as she walked out. She headed straight to her room to get dressed. Almost as if to cover the pain like clothes covered her body.

This time of year always ailed her and all that she could think to do was to distance herself from everyone else. She just wanted to disappear. To be invisible to everyone but she knew that it could never happen. It could never happen for she was well known. She was one of the hottest girls at school and everyone knew her. She was only 19 but she was popular and liked by everyone, only because they didn't know what she had done.

She dwelled on what she had done for years and showed no sign of being her old self ever again. She stared off in the distance while thinking about it as she walked to class until she suddenly felt something slam into her and she fell to the ground. She hit hard and it was the only thing that had snapped her out of this trance that she had seemingly been in for weeks. She was lying on her back on the ground looking up at the clear blue sky until a hand suddenly came into her line of sight. It reached out for her and she accepted it into hers and hoisted herself up. "Thanks" was all she said as she walked away briskly before the stranger could respond and headed straight for class.

By the time she got to Ms. Willis's class she was already back in her trance. She was swimming in her own thoughts again. When she got to her seat she laid her head down and managed to drift off dreaming and reliving that night. She only awoke to the sound of Ms. Willis asking her a question which she had no idea what the answer was. She decided that she had to at least try and took a wild guess. Amazingly she got it right and managed to stay awake for the rest of the class. Though she was awake she stared off. She couldn't help but to keep reliving that night. It was so cold and dark and she'd never been more alone in her life. She just curled up in a ball and cried as she felt part of her die. But she didn't want to think about that. She wanted to try to get on with her life that's why she came to college. To get a fresh start. To think about school work and parties and anything else except that night. She wanted to get away. She needed to get away.

After class she decided to get in her car and drive to her special spot. A small place inside a cave behind a waterfall she had found a few years back when it all first happened. She was the only one that new about it and she felt safe there. She truly felt safe, it was the closest thing that she could get to the feeling of being home. Or at least what she thought the feeling of home felt like. She hasn't felt at home in so many years that she had forgotten what it felt like. Oh how she wished that she could turn back time. She wanted to go back to when life was simpler and she didn't have this burden. When she could go home and feel safe not paranoid. She needed closure desperately but it could never happen. And even if she could she knew that it would be to much to go back there. Back "home". Back where everyone knew what happened. Back where everyone would ask and she would just have to fake it. She could not handle that right now. Possibly not ever.

She went straight to her car, plugged in her phone, and hit the road. She knew that this would be a two or three day trip. It was so far out it would take her hours to get there. The only time she stopped was to go in a convenience store and get some snacks to last a few days. She grabbed a few bags of chips, some candy bars, and a few bottles of water. And she headed back out again. About three hours after that she finally reached the spot. Well she still had a little ways to hike until then but she already felt safe. She knew that she could be herself here. She knew that she could stare off or swim in her thoughts or do whatever else she wanted to try to feel better. To try to get away or to immerse herself in it. She could do whatever she needed.

She could be free.

She hiked to the spot which only took her about half an hour, after all she had harder workouts on swim team. When she got there she sauntered along the rocks at the edge of the waterfall that led to the cave behind it. She slowly stepped on to the smooth platform of rock that was the cave floor. There was a lot of sunlight coming through so she could see the entirety of the cave. She saw all the furniture that she had placed there months before. She had placed a rug, a couch, a coffee table, and a bed with a nightstand. She had also placed a dresser which housed a few bikinis and a couple of her favorite outfits. She didn't come out here much but she loved it here. It was her favorite place in the world.

She then started to undress to put on a swimsuit. She quickly got dressed considering that she was the captain of the swim team and she has done this ten million times before. After she was in her swimsuit she hurried to dive in the water. She couldn't wait to feel the nice cool liquid on her skin. She knew that it would instantly calm the racing thoughts in her mind. She went to the edge of the platform. She calmly turned around and put her back to the water. She slowly scuffled back making sure that she didn't fall into the water but only had her ankles hanging off the edge. Then she readied herself and dove into the water letting the cool water from the waterfall hit her body as she completed her dive. She loved the feeling of accomplishing a perfect dive just as much as she loved the feeling of being fully submerged in the crisp cool water. In this moment she felt accomplished, safe, and at home. She had a sense of belonging that she had missed for so long. She was happy once again.

After hours of swimming and diving she decided to climb out, dry off, and lay down. Once she hoisted herself up onto the cave floor she bent down and reached for her towel. She quickly dried herself because she was exhausted and couldn't wait to lay down and go to sleep. She swiftly took off her swimsuit and began to dress. She chose her favorite fluffy pajamas and crawled under the nice warm comforter to get into bed. And with that she let the night take her to her dream state.

When morning was just creeping over the mountains parallel to the waterfall, light started to flood the cave as she batted her eyes open. Once they were fully open she sat up and looked at the beautiful scenery. All the green trees surrounding the lake at the end of the waterfall. She also looked at the cattails just barely in the soil by the lake. And all the pretty red, blue, yellow, and purple flowers sitting calmly on the grass. She slowly got up in fear of losing her balance and headed out of the cave. She strolled along the rocks by the lake and took in all of the beauty. She couldn't help but smile for she was so happy to be back in her special place. Just watching the water from the waterfall trickle down over the rocks above the cave entrance. She needed this. She needed a break to just clear her head and not have to be a prisoner of her own thoughts. To get out of her own head. She had finally found her peace and serenity. She had found her happy place.

As she was sitting there she could help but to think of her old home. The house was more of a modern style. It had all the new appliances, beautiful hardwood floors, high ceilings. Her mother had told her that her and her father had bought it so she could grow up there and maybe even inherit it one day. They tried to make it everything that she wanted. When she was growing up. She had a playhouse in the backyard and a treehouse hideaway. Her and her parents would go up to the treehouse and play for hours. They would play board games, card games, and anything else they could think of. They even had a small TV in the treehouse hanging on one of the walls. She could remember them making a palette on the floor of the treehouse and just laying there cuddling and watching TV. And late at night after the sun would set, they would sometimes go for a little ride before going back in the house to go to sleep. They would all crowd in the car and head downtown on a Friday night and see all the people at the

theaters, bars, clubs, and some just walking trying to get to where they we're going next. She would often find herself having a hard time to keep her eyes open and drifting in and out of sleep. Sometimes she would get so tired that they would have to go home. And once they we're finally home her dad would carry her up the stairs to her bedroom and tuck her in. That didn't last long because a few hours later she would wake up and walk to her parents' room and crawl in their bed and sleep between the two of them. She now had a hard time believing how many years it has been since then. How many years it has been since she had seen her parents.

After her pleasant trip down memory lane she got up and walked back into the cave to change into her swimsuit again. After she changed she dove off of the platform and swam for hours. She practiced her freestyle, backstroke, and breaststroke, and **IM**. She never did butterfly unless she was doing **IM** because she thought that she was terrible at it. She tried her best not to do it in front of people because she was scared that they would think that she was drowning. She loved to do backstroke though. She loved that she could just look up at the cloudy blue sky and just get lost in thought as she swam. She loved that she could just think about whatever during this stroke. That's when she's the most comfortable. She honestly just loved how freeing swimming was.

After hours of swimming, she finally got out and dried off. She put on a fresh pair or pajamas and got into bed. As the sun crawled behind the mountains her heavy eyes closed and she was once again returned to her dream state. Except she wasn't dreaming this time. That trip that she took down memory lane was still fresh in her mind and she was whisked into a nightmare. Just another form of torment that she had suffered for years. Although they had went away except for when she took a nap in class and now. They seemed to have suddenly returned just as quick as they have left. She couldn't help but to toss and turn in her bed while inside her nightmare she kept living the tragedy of that night. She felt like she was in that exact moment. She could feel the adrenaline coursing through her, the panic that she felt then, the people's screams bouncing off her skull and being absorbed by her brain. She couldn't help but to start running like she did back then. And then it was over. She snapped up from the bed and started panting like a dog on a hot summer day. She jolted her head from left to right to see where she was. Once she realised that she was still in the cave she calmed down instantly.

Even though that she was now calm she decided to take a midnight swim in the cold water. Tonight she had decided to put on a one piece and just dive in. She did and immediately started to do freestyle. After swimming for an hour and doing what she could only assume that she had swam what would be about 300 freestyle. After she had stopped to rest she spotted something by the edge of the water. She decided to swim closer to check it out. Once she got a little closer she could tell that it was an animal of some sort. She decided to get an even closer look. Upon further inspection she saw that it was a dark grey wolf. For whatever reason she kept moving closer to it as if a force was pulling her towards it. She couldn't stop herself but she didn't want to. She wanted to get closer. Once she was close enough to touch it she stopped. When the wolf saw how close she was it neither ran nor tried to attack her. What the wolf did

was extraordinary. It reached its head out almost at beckoning her to pet it. And so she did. And the wolf let her.

"Hi there" she said calmly to the beast. And of course it didn't answer her as one would suspect but instead it just stared at her blankly. "Your lucky" she said, "You don't have to worry about nightmares and being lonely, or confined, or grades, or keeping your "image" so people don't think badly about you. You just have to worry about catching food and a pack if you're in one. You don't have stress or cares. You can just run free. You could just keep running if you wanted to. I wish that I could, swimming is freeing but it's nothing like that. You have it easy. You live freely everyday. I only have one more day then I have to go back to regular life, and stress, pressure, and people." The wolf continued to let her pet it but its expression changed. Its eyes softened almost as if to show pity for her and her struggles. She continued, "Yeah you kill things but you do it for food. I did it on accident. It wasn't supposed to happen. THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO BE HERE AND IT'S ALL MY FAULT" she screamed startling the wolf a little." My parents are supposed to be here, not me. How could I not tell someone? I knew what they were doing and I didn't say anything." she managed to say in between sobs. "If I would have told someone they would be here today. I could have saved them but I didn't. It's all my fault" The wolf's eyes softened even more after hearing this. Its eyes were almost pleading with her as if it were trying to tell her that it wasn't her fault. And upon looking into the wolf's eyes and seeing what it was trying to say she silently agreed for once. People had been telling her for years in her hometown but she couldn't stand to hear it anymore so she left and went to college in another state to get away. To try to get a fresh start where no one knew what had happened. That would have worked but she couldn't leave it behind. She couldn't stop thinking about that night, the days leading up to it, and the time before. She tried her best to but she never could.

She had finally admitted to herself that she didn't kill them. That it was just an accident like the death certificate had said. She knew that she would have to admit it to herself sometime but she could never bring herself to. After all if she didn't blame herself, then whose fault was it? She couldn't bear to place the blame on them. She loved them too much to do that. But on this night she admitted that too. That it wasn't her fault. That it was theirs. That they did it to themselves and that they just couldn't stop, even for her. It was too powerful. They were playing a twisted game that they could never win. Even though she was the card up their sleeves it still wasn't enough. And they lost. But the greatest loss wasn't theirs. It was her's. Cause since they decided to play that twisted game, the consequences left her all alone. With no one but the worst. What happened after that day was equally horrific. She was thrown into the foster system, getting abused in the worst ways possible until she was 18 and left. And on this night she relived everything. All the highs and lows. The happy moments and sad ones. Everything from going on walks with her dad to being scared for her life.

She sat in the water and wept. The only things providing relief was the wolf that had stayed to keep her company, and the cold, calming water. She had stayed in that spot and wept for hours. Once she eventually calmed down she thanked the wolf for staying there with her and swam back to the platform. Only to find that the wolf had followed her along the rocks and was

sitting on the smooth floor of the cave for her when she got there. After she pulled herself onto the platform she dried off, got dressed and climbed back to bed to sleep the remaining time until the sun came up. And when she finally got snuggled up in bed, the wolf surprised her by jumping onto the bed and laid at the foot of the bed to sleep with her. She was content in this moment for the first time since her parents died. But she was also sad, because she knew that she only had one more day left there and she wanted more time. But that would have to be something for her to figure out tomorrow because she had already closed her eyes and had fallen fast asleep.

IM: Medley is a combination of four different swimming styles—butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, and freestyle—into one race