

Children

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Bear Trap Lake June 17, 1987

McIntyre leaned forward as he pushed his paddle in the water. The muscles in his arms ached. He didn't know how much longer he could keep rowing the canoe.

He shot a quick glance over his shoulder. The swimmer still hounded him. The whole afternoon had the feel of a nightmare; the growing panic, the illogical but certain knowledge that the thing which pursued him was evil, and the utter, ruthless determination of the swimmer. The swimmer had grabbed McIntyre's canoe twice, and only luck and a good sense of balance had kept him from capsizing.

Splashes echoed behind him, and he braced himself for another hit. But nothing happened. The swimmer glided up beside him and McIntyre screamed. He yanked his paddle out of the water and swung it like a sword. The paddle slapped against the swimmer's skull, slicing through the skin. McIntyre leaned over the side of his canoe, and watched the bloody bubbles rise as the child sank beneath the waters.

Madison, Wisconsin May 4, 1969

Shouts and the tinkle of breaking glass woke him. He lay for a moment on the stained mattress, his legs trapped under Patty's, listening, before he realized that another riot was going on. He tried to remember if he knew of any action that day, but he thought of nothing.

Patty sat up and pushed her hair out of her face with one hand. "W-what's that?"

McIntyre shook his head.

Downstairs a door banged and Jason screamed "Piiigs!"

McIntyre heard footsteps on the stairs and suddenly the bedroom door swung open. Patty grabbed for her dress. Jason looked in.

"Hey, man," McIntyre said as he reached for a sheet to cover his nakedness. Something crashed beneath the window.

Jason didn't even notice. His thin face was flushed. "You gotta see this," he said. "It started on State Street, but they brought it down here"

"What happened?" Patty asked. She had pulled her dress on. It pooled around her legs, but her buttocks were still visible. McIntyre felt her growing excitement.

"I don't know, but it's a mess. You gotta see it." Jason ran down the hall to the other rooms, flinging the doors open so hard that they banged against the wall.

Patty stood up and McIntyre handed her a pair of underwear. He slipped into some cutoffs and shoved his feet into his sandals. Patty had already started for the door.

"Wait," he said, and closed the windows. Immediately the shouting became muffled. "Last time they used gas. We want to sleep here tonight."

She nodded. He took her hand and together they ran down the worn stairs and out the front door. On

the sagging porch, they stopped. Kids filled the street, screaming, yelling, some holding rocks, others with the tattered remains of signs. Cops were using nightsticks to move the crowd forward.

McIntyre took a step back. He didn't want to be part of that scene; it looked too dangerous to him. But Patty loved danger. She pulled him forward and rather than lose her, he followed her into the street.

The air was thick with the smell of sweat and fear. McIntyre coughed and brought an arm up to his face. Somehow Patty's hand slipped through his and he watched her run to the other curb. She was yelling something or maybe she was screaming. He tried to reach her--after what he had done two days before, he was scared to let her do anything alone--but he kept colliding with other bodies that pushed him forward in a wave. A woman brushed past him. She was moaning and blood was running from her left ear. Patty stood at the fringes of the crowd. As she waved her arms above her head, the motion hiked her dress up to show the edges of the underwear he had given her a few moments before. Then he lost sight of her. He finally made it to the curb as Patty crumpled onto the grass.

By the time McIntyre reached her, blood covered her face. He touched the sticky wetness. "Patty?" he said, but couldn't hear himself over the noise.

A car window shattered beside them. He thought he saw her eyelids flicker, although he wasn't sure. But he did know the exact moment she died. One moment, she was in her body, regulating its breathing, making its heart pump, and the next minute, she had left. And that was when he started to scream.

Bear Trap Lake June 17, 1987

He pulled the canoe up onto the shore and winced as the aluminum scraped the sand. Then he grabbed the rope, made sure it was firmly tied to the bow and tied the other end to an oak. He staggered across the sand and collapsed on the grass. The rich smell of the land filled his nostrils.

"Dad?"

The shout came from the cabin. McIntyre didn't move. He was too tired. His limbs hurt and the skin on his back was beginning to throb. He must have gotten too much sun.

"Dad?"

The call was closer. Sean knelt down beside him.

"I thought that was you. You okay?"

"I'd like a beer." McIntyre's voice scraped sandlike against his throat.

"Okay, you got it. Looks like you need some lotion too."

"Yeah." McIntyre breathed the word and the blades of grass in front of his face moved. He rested, almost dozing, as images of the afternoon ran through his mind.

He had decided to take a leisurely trip around the lake. Bear Trap was small, with five cabins and lots of open water. On weekdays, he and Sean were the only ones there. Seeing the swimmer dive in at the public landing had surprised him. It hadn't been until he had realized that it was one of the children paddling at him that he had grown frightened.

Cold, wet goo spurted on his back and McIntyre jumped.

"Sorry," Sean said as he rubbed the lotion in. "You really got fried. Why didn't you come in sooner?"

McIntyre shrugged. He imagined himself trying to explain what had happened to his son: Well, Sean, I had to kill a kid before I could get off that lake. But don't worry about it. I've killed kids before.

The lotion soaked into his back, easing the burn and stinging at the same time.

"I got you the beer, too."

McIntyre pulled himself up. He was going to be sore for days. Sean handed him the beer and McIntyre poured it into his mouth, not caring that some ran over his lips and dribbled off his chin. The icy coldness made his throat ache. After he finished half the can, he stopped, wiped his face with the back of his hand and took a deep breath.

Sean smiled. He had his mother's smile, crooked whimsical, and fey. Sometimes, McIntyre felt that he touched her through their son.

"Help me inside," he said to shake that lonely thought.

Sean pulled him up, and together they walked to the cabin they had finished building the summer before.

Highway 53 April 2, 1983

The extension course had gone well. Even after two sessions, McIntyre still didn't believe the enthusiasm that a group from Solon Springs, Wisconsin, showed in learning how to trace their family histories. He remembered that excitement from tracing his own history, but he had thought that was due to the peculiarity of his family background.

He steered the car carefully onto the highway. The road was thick with early April ice and slush. As he headed into the darkness, he felt a presence. He flicked on the brights and searched for deer in the trees.

Something thudded against the passenger side and he looked sharply. A packed wad of snow slid down the window. It had probably fallen from one of the branches above. The Oldsmobile swerved slightly and he righted it when a body slammed into the windshield.

McIntyre drew his breath in sharply and pumped the brakes. Then he looked up and found himself face to face with one of the children.

Children had been his grandfather's word but it only described their general shape and form. The eyes were hollow, dark, lacking whites, but reflecting light like a cat's. The creature pressed its face against the window and McIntyre could see its gray skin. Its hands were splayed the long fingernails tapping like claws against the glass.

The car swerved again, but this time McIntyre couldn't see. The back end fishtailed on the ice. McIntyre struggled to straighten it. The creature seemed to be laughing. It slid its hands up to the top of the windshield stretched its body along the glass and pulled, McIntyre stared for a moment at its shrunken penis, and the long, lean bones sliding into its pelvic girdle. He had learned over the years just how strong these things were. It would break in. And then it would kill him.

He made himself look away from the creature and out the windshield. The car was heading straight for the trees. He tried to turn the wheels, but they slipped on the slush. He had promised himself when Carol had died in January that he would let the next child go. But he couldn't. He pulled his foot off of the brake and stepped on the gas. The car lurched forward, slipping in the muck and finally slamming into an old pine. The creature flew back in a crunch of metal and glass, and hit its head on the tree trunk.

McIntyre shut off the ignition and shakily let himself out of the car. The front end was damaged beyond

repair, but he seemed unharmed. He stepped around the wreckage and looked down. The body was twisted between the tree and the car. Bone shards and bits of brain tissue hung from the flayed skin at the back of its skull. He leaned against the passenger door to catch his breath before taking the shovel out of the trunk. He tried to ignore the blood that slowly stained the snow red.

Bear Trap Lake June 17, 1987

Sean cooked dinner that night. McIntyre had a thudding headache and his back burned so badly that he couldn't lean against a chair. He sat on a stool and watched his son throw strips of chicken breast into the wok.

"The weirdest thing happened to me today," Sean said. He scraped the utensils against the pan as he stir-fried the meat. "Just after you went out canoeing."

McIntyre rubbed his hand against the back of his neck. The smell of cooking chicken made his stomach growl. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I had made myself some ice tea and I was heading out to the hammock when this thing ran through the kitchen."

McIntyre looked at his son. Sean kept his face averted as he added onions, bamboo shoots, water chestnuts and snow peas to the wok. "Then what?" McIntyre said.

"It was little, you know. And at first I thought it was a naked child. But it didn't look like a child." Sean laughed nervously. He shot a glance at his father. "I really did see this."

"I know," McIntyre said. "Tell me what happened."

"Nothing really. It just looked at me and then it scampered out through the living room door. By the time I got there, it was gone." Sean poured sauce over the entire mixture and stirred it. "Weird, huh?"

McIntyre didn't say anything. The first time he had seen one of the creatures had been on the day his father had died. McIntyre had been sixteen, like Sean.

"Dad?" Sean stopped stirring.

"I don't know what it is, Seanie. But if it's any consolation, I saw it too."

Sean grabbed a potholder and spooned the contents of the wok into a bowl. He placed rice in another bowl and brought them both to the table. "It scared me, Dad."

"It should." McIntyre grabbed a bowl and put food onto his plate. "They're dangerous."

Madison, Wisconsin August 18, 1971

Books, papers, dirty dishes and empty Coke cans covered the kitchen table. McIntyre was lost in a physics problem, deep within the spiral of numbers, all interconnected and beautiful, when Sharon set the baby in his lap.

Seanie drooled on the page. McIntyre looked up. Sharon smiled in a way that always made him smile back.

"I just realized I have to do a textural analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work, too. I didn't read the last question on the take-home."

McIntyre wiped the baby's spit off the paper and then rubbed Seanie's mouth. "And you don't have the poems."

"Not a one."

He sighed. He wouldn't be able to concentrate on his physics again until after Sean went to sleep. "I suppose it can't wait until tomorrow."

"Oh, it could," she said. "But I'd flunk. The test is due at my 7:50."

"Who's going with you?"

"You worry too much."

"Who?"

"I'll stop at my sister's on the way."

"All right." He set his physics book on top of the page he had been working on. "But you owe me."

She shrugged, then bent down and kissed him. Her skin smelled like sunshine and perfume. She ran her hand on the baby's bald head then grabbed a notebook off the table and let herself out the back door. As the screen banged shut, she turned around and waved. He watched her walk through the trees lining Vilas Park.

When McIntyre no longer saw her blonde hair flowing out behind her, he pulled a book on Celtic mythology out from under a stack of papers. He cradled the baby in one arm and thumbed through the copy, searching for a familiar child-like form. The book said that the children were rare, that they haunted families for generations because of simple things, mistakes long gone. McIntyre hoped that the book had the secret to ending the curse. But then Seanie choked, coughed and started to wail. McIntyre placed the book back in its hiding place.

The baby continued to cry for most of the evening, until McIntyre cuddled with him on the living room floor in front of the television.

The shrill ring of the phone woke McIntyre up. The tv was broadcasting static. Sean was asleep on his back. The grey light of dawn filtered in through the uncurtained windows. McIntyre wondered where Sharon was. He grabbed the screaming phone and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

"Yes?"

"Is this Sharon Blason's residence?"

"Yeah "McIntyre came fully awake. The voice sounded official.

"This is the Madison Police Department. Are you her husband?"

"Sort of."

"We have a situation down at Camp Randall. A squad will be at your home shortly to pick you up."

McIntyre felt cold. The demonstrations had slowed down. And Sharon hadn't been involved with the movement anyway. "What kind of situation?"

"It's better that the officers tell you in person, Mr. Bla-son."

"What kind of situation?" The panic in his voice woke up the baby. Seanie whimpered.

"I'm sorry, sir. But your wife is dead. The squad will take you down to the morgue to identify her body."

"No," McIntyre said. He watched Sean grab the edge of a blanket and fall back into sleep. "I want to see her now."

"Mr. Blason, it's not a good-

"I don't care." He set the receiver down, got up and washed his face in the kitchen sink. Then he called Mike, his upstairs neighbor, and asked him to come down and watch Sean. Mike arrived at the same time the squad car did.

McIntyre didn't remember getting into the squad or driving the short distance to the stadium. But he did remember watching the iron gates rise in front of him, and passing the two obscure Civil War soldiers decorating the archway. He hadn't known that Sharon crossed behind the stadium on her way home. If he had known that he would have insisted on walking with her. He explained that to the officers, over and over. They said nothing as they led him to her.

She lay beneath one of the tall old trees decorating the path. Her shoes were missing and her dress was ripped. Her long blonde hair was tangled and black with matted blood.

"It's Sharon," he said calmly enough. He had seen death before. He was getting used to it.

But that afternoon, when Seanie had smiled his first real smile, sweet, whimsical and fey, McIntyre had started to cry.

Bear Trap Lake June 17, 1987

"Dad?"

Sean's whisper echoed across the darkness. In the silence between his question and McIntyre's answer, something fell in the kitchen.

"What?"

"Hear that?"

McIntyre sat up in bed. The moonlight outlined Sean standing in front of the window. The house was quiet. The woods were quiet. All McIntyre heard were the waves lapping against the shore. "No."

"There's something downstairs."

"It's probably a raccoon."

"Yeah, probably."

McIntyre lay back down, wishing Sean would leave so that he could investigate. Below them, a chair scraped across the linoleum.

"Whatever it is," Sean whispered. "It sure wants to get caught."

McIntyre frowned and rolled out of bed. He padded barefoot across the hall and grabbed the hunting rifle. The gun wasn't loaded, but no one had to know that. It was big enough to scare a person, and his presence was enough to frighten a raccoon. He didn't want to think about the possibility of the noise

being anything else.

He started down the spiral staircase. Sean was right behind him. "No," McIntyre whispered. "I'm going alone."

"No, you're not," Sean said. He followed his father down the iron stairs and into the kitchen. Nothing moved in the darkness. McIntyre flicked on the light.

The screen door stood open and the garbage pail had been tipped over. Garbage covered the floor. McIntyre relaxed. "We've got to find a better way to store that shit."

He turned toward Sean. His son was staring at the refrigerator. There was a tiny, bloody handprint on the freezer door.

Elmira, Wisconsin October 20, 1976

"I wonder which one of us it's come for," McIntyre's grandfather said. He stuck a finger in the footprint. "Blood's still wet."

McIntyre started up the porch steps. Grandfather grabbed his arm. "Don't tell me you haven't seen 'em, Davie. They come after a McIntyre has his first woman and they stay with him until he dies."

McIntyre wrenched his arm free. The children he had seen over the years—and killed—had been nightmares. Figures of his imagination taking form in the daylight.

"Running from me won't help either of us, Davie. They may kill our lovers, but it's me McIntyres they want."

McIntyre turned. His grandfather stood beside the bloody footprint. The old man's eyes still twinkled with intelligence.

"What do they want us for?" McIntyre whispered.

"I never took the time to ask one of them." The old man pulled himself up the porch steps. "But they've been there ever since I slept with Tina Wood sixty years ago. And I know your daddy started seeing 'em after he started seeing your ma. And I don't know about you. You kept it real quiet and if you hadn'ta run right now, I would have guessed you hadn'ta seen 'em at all."

"What are they?"

His grandfather shrugged. "Children. I think they're just children."

"It makes no sense."

"Maybe not. But they follow rules, Davie. They hunt alone. If you kill one of theirs, they kill one of yours. If you don't kill them, they kill you. Either way, you don't win."

McIntyre frowned. "You ever tried letting them be?"

"No." The old man took a deep breath. "But I think your daddy did."

The thought made McIntyre ache. He opened the door and let himself inside. His grandfather's house smelled like leather and old books.

"Davie," his grandfather said. "We got a better chance together than we do by ourselves."

"I'll be right back," McIntyre said. He ran toward his grandfather's bedroom, opened the closet and pulled out the old deer rifle. He had to dig for the bullets. He loaded the gun and then ran back for the porch. When he reached the dining room, he heard a scream and a thud. Gingerly he opened the door. His grandfather's heels rested on the top step. His grandfather's head lay in a pool of blood on the concrete sidewalk.

Bear Trap Lake June 17, 1987

"You know what these things are, don't you, Dad?" McIntyre didn't answer. He grabbed Sean's elbow to keep them together. "We're going to go back upstairs and get the bullets," McIntyre said. "This time we're going to do it right."

"Dad?"

Metal clanged in the utility room. Suddenly McIntyre knew where the creature was. Sean yanked his arm free and ran in the direction of the noise. Then the lights went out.

"Sean?" McIntyre's voice sounded hollow in the quiet room. He heard a rustle off to his left.

"It's okay, Dad. I'm coming back toward you. Just stay still, okay?"

"All right, Sean."

McIntyre was holding his breath. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see Sean make his way across the kitchen floor. Behind the boy, a shadow moved. McIntyre opened his mouth to shout a warning, but Sean screamed first. McIntyre started toward his son, thinking that they couldn't kill Seanie. It wasn't fair that they killed Seanie. McIntyre couldn't have protected himself from them this long only to have them kill his son.

Something leaped onto McIntyre's back. Sharp claws digging into his sunburn made him cry out. He whirled, trying to shake the thing off of him, catching its slightly musty odor every time he moved. He slammed into the counter and the creature let go. McIntyre turned and the creature reached for his face, its claws narrowly missing his eyes. McIntyre grabbed the creature's arms, squeezing them until he felt bones snap. The creature screamed, and McIntyre dropped it. It landed heavily on the floor and then ran out into the darkness.

"Sean?" McIntyre called.

He saw his son in the moonlight, lying in the same position they had found his mother in.

"Seanie?"

McIntyre knelt beside Sean and touched his face. McIntyre's fingers came away sticky with blood. Goddammit, he thought. He had let that one go free, and Seanie was still dead.

* * *

Fond du Lac, Wisconsin February 26, 1966

McIntyre's father knelt beside the crumpled body. McIntyre stood beside him.

"I can only tell you this once, Davie," his father said. "You see one of these, you leave it alone. You don't touch it. After tonight, the score will be even. And if one comes after you, you let it. You may not save yourself, but you'll save a lot of others. You understand me, David?"

McIntyre looked at his father's face. The older man was serious. "Yeah, Dad," McIntyre said. "I understand."

His dad went to the shed to get a shovel so that they could dispose of the creature. McIntyre knelt beside the tiny body and noted how the skin along the back of its head flapped open, how the bones splintered and mixed with its grey brain tissue, how its blood melted the snow. He memorized the details because he knew he would never see anything like it again.