

## The Water Woman

As dusk settled on June 22nd, the summer solstice, a spattering of fireflies made their first seasonal appearance as Samantha Jackson hurried through the church parking lot.

*Magical*, she thought, outstretching her hand. They were gone. *What-where'd they g-* A plunge in temperature followed by a putrid stench left Sam shivering and gagging simultaneously. Sam spun around and said, *What the?* her frantic eyes searching for the source of the horrible smell. A woman was standing in the alcove of the church on the northern side of the building. Fifteen yards away, Sam could see only the woman's back, covered in long, black hair. Her head slumped forward, the woman appeared to be wet as though she had been trapped in a downpour only moments earlier. Sam noted the cloudless sky, a little darker now.

“Hello”? “Hey, are you okay?” Sam took a step forward, instinctively covering her mouth and nose. “Can I help you?” The woman shifted her weight from one leg to the other. A slow slosh followed by suction and a pop echoed from the breezeway. *Slurrrrp-pop! Slurrrrp-pop!* The tiny hairs on the back of Sam's neck screamed to attention; she backed away slowly, turned towards home, and ran.

\*\*\*

“Online classes suck!” Sam proclaimed, frowning at her laptop screen. The last two months of school were painful compared to her prior academic experience at Balboa Valley High School in California. Friends, teachers in real life-though she could hardly say she missed going to class. Sam's last counselor described her as “Not a troublemaker; just troubled.” Sam considered the label generous if not wholly false. She knew that where trouble appeared, Sam

followed, or maybe it was where Sam appeared, trouble followed. Either way, the two seemed inseparable. Skipping classes. Failing grades. How many times had she dangled from her 2nd-floor bedroom window, escaping the confines of home and the secrets harbored there?

Now, everything had changed - geographically. Brenda, Sam's mom, had lost her fourth job that year- the binges lasting longer with each firing, practically guaranteeing her husband would engage in yet another affair. When the indiscretions became backyard barbecue fodder for the neighbors, Frank and Brenda decided a move to Pennsylvania would provide the fresh start the family needed. Sam reminded her parents, "It's only fresh on the outside." Her tone and expressionless face conveyed a distant coolness, yet a pang of remorse jabbed at her ribcage. Looking at the dejected pair, these flawed people, Sam's heart overflowed with love for them.

\*\*\*

Shortly after Sam's fifteenth birthday in February, Frank decided the family needed therapy, especially Sam, who now attended daily sessions with Dr. Torres. Scanning the room, Sam considered her seating options. *The blue couch? No way. Too cliché.* The easy chair, closest to Dr. Torres, falsely advertised comfort, always unyielding to Sam's multiple contortions- knees to chest, knees to one side-feet scrunched against the other, feet flat on the floor with a rigid back. *No thanks.* Shuffling over to the low table, Sam plopped down on a poof. This poof was firm, stuffed within a styrofoam bead of bursting at the seam, not at all like her poof at home. Hers had lost its puffiness long ago and leaned to one side, deflated.

Dr. Torres worked with a young clientele; her patients varied in age from three to eighteen, and her specialty was “trauma care.” Sam hardly considered her parents’ separation a traumatic event and regularly made her sentiments known to Dr. Torres. “It definitely sucks,” Sam admitted, “but I can’t blame my dad.” “Well, I guess I can blame him for some stuff.”  
*Would Brenda have become an alcoholic if Frank had been faithful? Would Frank have been faithful if Brenda were sober?*

Dr. Torres asked her about the same things every day: How are you feeling? How have you been sleeping? Have you talked to any friends? (*She knows I have zero friends here.*) Have you thought any more about your last birthday? (*What the heck? I don’t like to talk about it because that’s the night that Mom and Dad separated.*) Sam really didn’t know what she got out of therapy.

“I really don’t know what I get out of these therapy sessions” Sam quipped, “I’m perfectly fine.”

Without a verbal response, Dr. Torres conveyed her thoughts with eye contact alone.  
*Hallucinations, Sam. Healthy people don’t see things that aren’t there.*

\*\*\*

Sam pushed against fragmented images of her mom, drunk and belligerent, and awoke in a light sweat. *Ugh!* The nightmares varied, but the emotions remained- anger, fear, and always dread.

Since the move in January, Sam's life had been turned upside-down. The "fresh start" of her parents' dreams perished as quickly as a summer peach forgotten in the fruit bowl. Mom had promised them both, "No more drinking" and for a while, she didn't. Within a few weeks of sobriety, Brenda's skin transformed from a sallow yellow to a healthy, rose-blush, and her eyes, long dulled by a continual hangover, sparkled with life and clarity. For Sam, it was heaven on earth; her momma was back!

They sang in the kitchen. They watched old movies in bed surrounded by bags of black licorice, Starburst, and Gummy Bears. Clothes shopping together, which they hadn't done since Sam's 6th-grade year, proved to be the best remedy for their strained relationship.

Brenda modeled outfits garnered from the Junior section, inviting hilarity as Sam judged. "Oh no, Momma." "Please take that off right this second." In the end, Brenda would leave behind anything she had chosen for herself, and for Sam, purchased the few items they could afford.

At home, Frank would grumble over the receipts but beam a smile in solidarity with their family's long-lost stability. And then, the stability was gone. Just like that.

Brenda had visited a new friend in the neighborhood without a rehearsed strategy to decline the offer of a glass of wine. By the time Sam allowed her fears to consume her and her stomach, Brenda stumbled through the front door, having tripped over the threshold.

"Ah, shit" she slurred.

\*\*\*

It took Sam three days to summon the courage to tell Dr. Torres about “the water woman” (that’s the name Sam’s brain came up with every time she thought of “her,” “it.”)

“Why were you at the church?”

“I wasn’t.”

“You said it was in the church parking lot that you first encountered this lady.” “Had you attended services there?”

“No. I told you I don’t believe in that stuff. I was taking a shortcut through the parking lot to get home.”

Dr. Torres paused, waiting for Sam to look up. “Can we go through all of the stages of your vision again?”

“You mean my “hallucination” Sam gestured with air quotation marks. *Hallucinations. That is what they’re calling it. “It” being a horrifying ghost or demon or whatever it was...whatever she was, ruining Sam’s life.* It’s true that the hauntings started right around the time her parents split up, but these visions were not hallucinations. And yes, she understood the terminology:

Visual -seeing things that aren’t there.

Olfactory- smelling things that aren’t there.

Gustatory- tasting things that aren’t there.

Auditory- hearing things that aren’t there.

Tactile - feeling things that aren’t there.

It sounded like a whole lot of crazy, but Sam knew her experiences were real.

\*\*\*

Pennsylvania proved a lot less interesting than California. Still, Sam loved the quaint, two-bedroom rental resting on top of a small hill overlooking a wheat field, a luscious greenbelt, and a majestic forest. *Frank says the Susquehanna River runs through it and that a lot of folks have gotten lost or disappeared in there. Yeah, he really said, "Folks." Whatever.*

Frank decided the forest paths invited unsavory characters, meaning Sam was not allowed to venture there alone. Soon after that discussion, he came home with a local barn dog for her companionship. Sam was more of a cat person, but the chunky, friendly, and fluffy mongrel named Haystack easily won her over. The dog became her only friend, and they walked for hours across the landscape.

\*\*\*

Brenda's guilt over her personal failings was assuaged only by the numbness that alcohol brings. Even Sam knew failure was inevitable for Brenda. *Drinking is just a symptom of the problems we try to conceal. How is it that I know these things at fourteen that my parents don't seem to understand?*

Brenda had her good days and her bad days. Sam was hoping February 11th would be one of her good days. Despite the possibility of disaster, Sam had dared to plan a big birthday party with her new friends. She knew it was risky. How many holidays and special events had shattered beneath her parents' fights? How many humiliating experiences involving

her drunk mother and cheating father would it take for Sam to realize her house was off-limits to outsiders?

\*\*\*

The first time Sam and Haystack ventured deep enough into the woods to find the raging river, it was the smell of marshy muck that caught their attention. Haystack stopped, lifted one of her front legs, and tilted her twitching nose upward. Sam could smell it and now see it, courtesy of the black gunk stuck to her white Vans. *Gross.*

Silently, they walked on towards the river, and just before rounding a bend, Sam heard the rushing water. A fainter, watery sound distracted her, and something moved behind her. *Okay-fine. Other people can walk in the woods; I don't own the place.* Sam backtracked, figuring it was one or both of the middle school-age brothers whose house sat on the same hill as Sam's. Pivoting, she jumped behind a wide tree, and yelled, "A-ha!"

\*\*\*

Sam last spoke to Brenda the night of the ruined birthday party. Sam's anxiety thudded in her ears. Tonight was Sam's party. Fifteen girls were to sleep over for scary movies and midnight runs through the wheatfield. Dad was out of town, so everything depended on Mom. Brenda dressed for her bartending job, a short black skirt, white blouse, black fishnet stockings, and her trademark red lipstick. Slumped on her parents' bed, Sam contemplated the idea of wearing lipstick tonight. Sam snapped out of her daydream when she noticed the liter bottle of



SMIRNOFF Vodka peeking out from under a towel near the nightstand. She lifted the towel and met eyes with her mom.

“Why, Momma?” Can’t you just stop? “

“You don’t know how it is, Sam!”

“I do know! You wreck everything!”

“And your father is an angel? Is that right?” The fight incited, and there was no return.

\*\*\*

Sam’s eyes tried to make sense of the scene before her as she screamed and scrambled backward. Haystack bounded into the picture, tail wagging, tongue hanging out. Sam tiptoed closer and realized it was a carcass or maybe just the skinned remains of a deer underneath all of the buzzing flies. The deer’s head, fully intact, stared accusingly from its felled tree perch. The mouth moved, surely about to identify her killer, and Sam screeched again as a globule of maggots rolled from underneath the creature's upper lip to its swollen tongue. “Disgusting” Sam whispered. “Who does this?” When Haystack began licking the deer’s hind skin, Sam was done. “Haystack!” “Let’s go!” *Something is not right here.*

\*\*\*

Sam stared at the clock as 7:00 pm came and went. The tiny family room filled with sleeping bags and giggling girls. Most parents just dropped off their kids and left, but a few hung around waiting for a responsible adult. *They weren’t going to find one.* At 8:45 pm, Brenda

staggered through the doorway, using the arm of a strange man to keep her balance. An audible intake of breath came from the room, Sam included.

Blood streamed from Brenda's nose and had been for some time if her stained white blouse were an indicator. Through her swollen lips, Brenda explained that she'd crashed into a telephone pole on her way home. She said it was the rain and the leaves. With wild gesticulations and slurred speech, it was clear to everyone. She was drunk. One by one, Sam's guests left with their parents, glancing at Sam in pity.

\*\*\*

The hauntings continued. Sam researched town deaths, especially accidents or suicides involving drownings and water in general. A total of three people in the last ten years had jumped to their death- all of them men. A young woman had hanged herself in 1944 after learning of her fiance's death in Germany, WWII, and most recently, the town grieved over the premature deaths of several teens from a drug overdose. One story troubled Sam more than the others. In 1970, a school bus carrying twenty-two children slid off of Bear Swamp Road during an epic rainstorm. The bus, the children, and the driver sank into the mucky blackness of Bear Swamp. Parents of the deceased children claimed to have been haunted by tar-covered figures and a "sloshing sound." It was the worst disaster recorded in Susquehanna County to date.

After discovering so many awful incidents, Sam struggled to sleep. That night, she could feel herself giving in to the comfort of her favorite blanket. A muted sound tickled her ear. *Was it in her dream? Was it real?* At first, it seemed like a soft wind or the soothing hush of a mother to her infant, *Hush, hush, shush*. An uneasiness slid into Sam's consciousness, and the shushing

sound grew more distinct. *Shush- shush-shlush-slus-slus-slurp. Slurp-pop! Slurp-pop!* Bolting upright in bed, Sam shivered in the icy room and gagged upon the smell of rot.

\*\*\*

In her research, Sam noted commonalities in stories of ghosts, poltergeists, and “other” beings. Sam’s incidents, though different each time, shared some typical (as documented by paranormal scientists) constants. There was a significant drop in temperature, indicating the presence of a ghost. The olfactory factor-smells-which apparently, can be pleasant as well as disturbing. *Nothing pleasant smelling about my ghost.* In several documented haunting cases, the haunter wanted something from the haunted. Usually, it was something like revealing their killer or finding the hidden treasure. Sometimes, it was a need to say goodbye or ask for forgiveness. And rarely, the ghost simply craved a conjuring of fear, pain, and death.

\*\*\*

A week after Sam’s birthday. Brenda moved out to a one-bedroom apartment where she said she could “Drink in peace.” *One bedroom means there’s no room for me which is just fine because we are “estranged.” That’s what Dad and Dr. Torres call it when I refuse to talk to or about my mother.* Well, she pretty much gave up on me, too. Dad looks so devastated when I remind him of the embarrassment she caused at my ruined party. Dad never talks to her either- at least, not in person or on the phone. Sometimes, I hear him talking to himself, practicing what he might say. It’s always a lot of “Oh, Brenda” wishing things had ended differently, and muffled crying.

Sometimes, I want to tell him that everything will be okay, but he hates anyone to see him cry. I suppose we're all coping in our own ways. *Dr. Torres says I'm angry- but that's not all of it.*

\*\*\*

Dr. Torres never really stated anything as a fact. She listened intently, and she asked questions. When Sam shared her newfound research with Dr. Torres, proclaiming it as proof of her hauntings, the doctor did not agree or disagree. She simply asked Sam a series of questions.

Do you believe in ghosts? Do you find it interesting that you do not believe in religious teachings but are convinced you've been haunted by a spirit? How does it make you feel when the hauntings take place? Why do you suppose the haunting started soon after your parents' separation?

Sam answered every question with the same response. "I don't know."

"Perhaps it's best for us to keep an open mind as we explore these visions" suggested Dr. Torres. Sam knew what that meant. *She didn't believe her!* Sam shut down.

"Fine."

"Sam."

"I said, fine."

\*\*\*

Rushing back to the beaten trail, Sam watched the trees bend and sway in the coming storm, seemingly passing a secret she couldn't catch. As Sam lifted her foot to the boulder border at the wood's beginning, Haystack emitted an alien whine. Sam whipped her head around and

saw a woman clothed in a black skirt, white shirt, and ripped black tights, standing at the sheer side of a rock formation. At about 50 yards away, the image was blurred, but Sam noticed the way the clothes clung to the woman and the stringy wetness of her black hair. Lightning split the blackened sky. The woman's body contorted into a crab-like shape, and she scurried up the face of the wall. *Slurrrrp-pop! Slurrrrp-pop! Slurrrrp-pop! Slurrrrp-pop!* In Sam's mind, the unnatural speed compared only to watching a video on fast forward times four. Frozen in terror, Sam watched the woman step from the cliff and float in mid-air, her arms extended like a martyr.

Sam and Haystack raced for the safety of home. Sheets of rain nearly blinded her, but Haystack led the way. Sam's t-shirt clung to her chest, and she swore she could see her heart pounding on the outside of it. Frank was waiting on the porch when the exhausted pair collapsed into the house.

“Dad!” “I saw her!” *And, oh my god! Dad! She's a monster, she's a floater, she's a crab!*

“Whoa, whoa; slow down girl.”

“I think she's evil, and she's going to get me!” Black and white clothes, black tights, and no face! No face, Dad!

“Sam, breathe. Listen to me. Listen. We need to talk about your mom.”

“What?” “No!”

“Sam, what was Momma wearing the last time you saw her?”

“How should I remember, I don't know!”

“Sam, it was your birthday. It was your birthday party.”

“What?”

“You two had a fight. After she came home drunk. Do you remember? Sam?”

“No! No! No! No! No!”

“She left you alone, and never came back.”

\*\*\*

Sam kicked out the strange man and glared at her mother. “How could you? Do you know how embarrassing you are? You ruin everything in my life! I hate you. I wish you were dead, so I could have a normal life!” Brenda gave Sam a knowing nod.

“Have a nice life,” she said and walked out the door.

\*\*\*

*Dr. Torres said it was my “coping mechanism.” My brain knew I couldn’t accept the truth, so it made up a whole new one. The water woman visions just popped into my head because I was a little wacko. That’s not how Dr. Torres put it exactly, but you know what I mean.*

\*\*\*

The “strange man” turned out to be a “regular” as Brenda would say, and Frank dismissed him as an inconsequential “bar-fly.” There was no point in blaming him for what came next. Rational thinking eludes the intoxicated mind, and neither Brenda nor her companion questioned

her request to be dropped at the site of her battered car. Whether she had planned to drive to Aunt Steph's or purposely to danger, Sam would never know. Brenda's VW Bug slid off of Bear Swamp Road in gale-force winds rivaling those of the 1970 record. The car sank quickly into Bear Swamp, and Sam's mom suffocated in the foul, black mud.

\*\*\*

Flashing red and blue lights traveled the long dirt driveway where Sam waited. Startled by the shrieking words of denial, Sam's eyes darted for the source until she recognized her own voice in sobbing wails. Later, while waiting at the station for Aunt Stephie, and drifting in and out of consciousness, Sam overheard an officer from the scene recount what had happened. He described paramedics pulling a body from the swamp and the sickening sound of suction.

"It was like that swamp had swallowed the lady and wasn't gonna give her up." Then, "Pop!" just like that, she was out; a half-chewed, slimy morsel from the belly of a monster."

\*\*\*

Visiting Dr. Torres once per week allowed Sam the time to focus on the new school year, in person and to reconnect with her friends. Sam still found the guilt over her mom's death overwhelming no matter how many times her dad said, "It's not your fault." No wonder she had lived in a delusional world. The hauntings were just her guilt manifested. *If only I could apologize to her, she thought. But, I don't believe in that sort of stuff.*

Today, Dr. Torres had a new candle burning. Sam didn't care for the scent. It was kind of "earthy." Halfway through the appointment, Sam had to excuse herself early to vomit in the bathroom. *It's that candle. Yuck.* Walking home, Sam contemplated cutting through the church parking lot but decided against it. She couldn't shake that candle smell, and actually, it was becoming more than earthy; it was like rotten eggs; pungent.

\*\*\*

Before she turned the knob, Sam knew who was waiting in her room. The Water Woman sat in a puddle on Sam's bed, head downturned.

"Momma?" asked Sam. I know it's you. I forgive you, and I hope you can forgive me for what I said. I know that's why you're here. I know you didn't drive off the road on purpose. You would never hurt me like that. Momma?

Brenda stood up, her blonde hair shining oily black, and stepped forward. *Slurrrrp-pop!* Sam gagged and tried to silence the screamed warning in her head. *Slurrrrp-pop!* The Water Woman lifted her head. Black muck poured from her empty eye sockets and her fang-filled mouth.

\*\*\*

The End