

Water Baby

Doctor Summers had been expecting the folder which sat on his desk, but still he didn't want to look inside. He sipped his coffee for a moment and made some phone calls before he finally opened it. First he read a covering letter, followed by a copy of a police statement. He glanced through this, since he was already aware of the facts, and picked up the next piece of paper. It was a photocopy of some writing in large, childish scrawl, accompanied by a colourful picture of a little girl, swimming below a chubby crayoned line of blue waves.

‘My name is Sim Cheong,’ said the writing, ‘I have the same name as a girl in a very old story from my country. My country is South Korea. Sim Cheong had a Dad and then he was blind and then Sim Cheong jumped into the sea to heal him and then the King of the Sea saved her. Her Dad got better again and then she got married to a different King but he wasn't the King of the Sea. I wish I could jump in the sea and save someone, like Sim Cheong did in the story from my country. That would be a very nice thing to do, because Sim Cheong in the story will be very very old now and can't save anybody.’

There were more papers to look at, but suddenly the doctor's phone rang and made him jump.

“Mister Andrews is here, Doctor Summers.”

“Thank you, Madeleine. Please send him in.”

He closed the folder and stood up, ready to receive his patient formally. When Tom Andrews entered the room, the doctor was shocked by his appearance. He looked haggard, tired, unshaven, a man more beaten than he was the last time they'd met, which was only a week earlier. He walked round his desk to shake Tom's hand.

“Hello, Tom. Please, have a seat.”

Tom sat down in front of the desk and Doctor Summers returned to his seat. The large wooden desk felt like a divide between them, not a comfort, and for a moment neither of them spoke. Tom stared out of the window.

“So, how did the MRI go?”

“Fine,” Tom replied, without moving.

“I might get the results while we're talking. It always depends on the internal email queue.”

Doctor Summers was aware that he was just making pointless small talk as an avoidance tactic, and that Tom knew this too. He paused.

“I'm so sorry about what happened,” he said at last.

Tom continued to stare out of the window.

“I mean, this is a very difficult situation, Tom. I'm your cancer specialist and it's my job to deal with your treatment, but now you've agreed to waive the doctor-patient confidentiality so I can make a report for the police, as your doctor, regarding the events of last week.”

“They all think I let her down because I'm sick,” said Tom, “but that's not the reason.”

“Nobody thinks you let her down, Tom,” said Doctor Summers, but Tom didn't respond to this comment.

“Last week,” the doctor continued, “we met in this office to discuss the current status of your brain tumour. I advised you that the tumour had grown to the extent that you shouldn’t be trying to teach any more, that you should declare yourself sick, that the tumour might affect your brain’s perceptions, causing unpredictable or irrational thinking. I also told you there was a risk you would have visual or auditory hallucinations, that this is not a good scenario for a teacher who is responsible for children and this was also a reason to stay at home. What did you do after you left my office that day?”

Tom slumped back in his chair and looked directly at Doctor Summers.

“You know what I did,” he replied, “I ignored your instructions and I went straight back to school.”

“Why did you do that?”

“There was only a week to go until the summer holidays. I had so much to do and I didn’t think it would make much difference if I saw the year out. I also had a new student who was starting in my class that same day. I’d already arranged for her to have an intake meeting in the afternoon, so I could come here first and be back at school before she arrived.”

“This is,” Doctor Summers paused before he said the name and glanced at the file on his desk, “Sim Cheong.”

“Yes.”

Tom thought back to the moment when he’d first met Sim Cheong. It pained him to remember the little girl, petite even for a seven-year-old, dressed formally in a blue pleated skirt and white blouse, her black hair pulled back in two neat plaits.

“She was from South Korea,” Tom continued, as if that explained everything, “and Korean children are notoriously shy when they first arrive in school. Her grandparents were with her, since her parents had to be at work. I felt sorry for her because I didn’t see the point in her arriving with only a week left of school, and I thought it was a bit strange that her parents hadn’t just waited to start her in the new school year. Anyway, they were waiting for me in the library. The grandparents spoke almost no English. I’d been told Sim Cheong had a good grasp of English, but as I expected, she only stared at me when I spoke to her. We managed to communicate enough to establish that the class had their weekly swimming lesson the following day, and that there was an end-of-the-year trip to the beach on Friday, the last day of school.”

Tom paused and looked away from the doctor before he continued.

“Next morning, I took the class for their swimming lesson at the local pool. Sim Cheong turned out to be a confident swimmer, a proper water baby, diving in and easily swimming to the bottom of the pool. The instructor put her straight into the top group. At the end of the swimming lesson, the children broke from their teaching groups and played together in the shallow end. There was a moment when I looked for Sim Cheong, to see if she was playing with anyone and making new friends. I looked around and couldn’t see her, but just as I started to worry, she appeared at the deep end of the pool. I hadn’t noticed her heading that way. It was like she’d swum all the way underwater. I went along, pulled her out onto the poolside and reminded her that she was told to stay in the shallow end.”

“You said on the phone that you wanted to talk to me about some strange things, some things you didn’t mention to the police. None of this sounds that strange to me.”

“It’s what happened later in the week that I really need to share with you.”

“Alright. Go on.”

“On Thursday, the day before the beach trip, I was walking back to my classroom

after lunch to get ready for the afternoon. As I strolled past the girl's bathroom, I saw something odd, something that made me stop and go back to look again."

"In the bathroom?"

"Yes, and from where I was standing, I could peep through the half-open door without being seen. Sim Cheong was alone, filling a sink with water. While I watched, she turned off the tap, lifted her plaits out of the way with one hand and put her whole face under the water. She stood like this for a moment and then I realized she was actually *breathing*. I knew I should run in and pull her face out of the water, but I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I think I was just rooted to the spot for some reason – fascination, horror, confusion. I don't know, but it was quite clear she was breathing. Her little shoulders were moving up and down as she took deep breaths."

"You're sure you saw her breathing?"

"Quite sure."

"And then what happened?"

"After a moment, she stood up straight again, emptied the sink and dried her face with paper towels. I strolled away along the corridor and when I looked back, I saw her come out of the bathroom and head back towards the playground."

"How did you feel?"

"Back in my classroom, I wondered why Sim Cheong would do such a weird thing. To be honest, I felt invasive. It felt wrong to be watching one of my students in the bathroom, but what bothered me more, after you'd warned me, was did I really see the whole thing in the bathroom, or did I imagine it?"

"You know, Tom, when this happened, you could have contacted me. Why didn't you call?"

"Because I didn't want you to know that I'd gone back to school!"

Tom squirmed a little in his seat and frowned.

"But then things got even stranger," he said, "and now I wish I had called you. That afternoon, the class were completing an end-of-year writing task, called 'Who Am I?'. I was glad the children had to work in silence, because I had one of my headaches. I gave Sim Cheong the same task, so I could get an idea of what her writing was like, to pass on to her new teacher."

Doctor Summers pulled the photocopy writing sample from the folder.

"This is what she wrote?"

Tom glanced at it and nodded.

"I leaned over to see what she was writing. Most children write about their Sunday football team or their friends and family to identify themselves at that age, and I was just wondering why Sim Cheong had chosen her idea, when a child's voice, with a South-East Asian accent, suddenly disturbed the silence."

"Really? What did it say?"

"It said 'You are going to be alright, Mr Andrews.'"

"That must have given you quite a fright," said the doctor.

"Absolutely! I looked around, but no-one else seemed to have heard it. All the children were busy writing, undisturbed."

"You thought the voice was Sim Cheong's?"

"Well, there are no other South-East Asian children in my class. I sat down beside her and quietly asked her if she'd just spoken to me, and I heard the voice again, clear as a bell,

saying ‘Yes. I can make you better,’ but the thing is, Doctor Summers, it was as if I heard her in my mind. I didn’t see Sim Cheong’s lips move when she spoke.”

“Perhaps you mean *if* she spoke.”

“But I’m so sure of what I heard, just like I’m so sure I saw her breathing underwater in the bathroom.”

Doctor Summers paused and made a few notes.

“Now, take your time, Tom, and tell me what happened next day at the beach.”

“The weather was perfect. Everyone was having a great time, swimming, playing football and volleyball, building sandcastles, that sort of thing. I had plenty of parent volunteers with me, so I didn’t have to keep an eye on all the children myself, and I was confident that everyone was safe.”

Tom leaned forward now, put his elbows on his knees and hid his face in his hands. As Doctor Summers watched, Tom’s body began to shudder as he quietly cried, and the doctor kept a respectful silence. After a few minutes, Tom sat up, ran his hands through his hair in obvious agitation and sighed heavily. The doctor handed Tom a tissue and he wiped his eyes. He stared at the floor as he continued.

“I was playing volleyball further up the beach with a group of children, when suddenly there was a commotion on the edge of the water. Everyone was shouting and pointing. I ran over and saw Sim Cheong swimming away from the beach, heading out towards the open sea. She was already a long way off and a couple of the parents were starting after her. People kept shouting that they didn’t notice her swimming away.”

“And did you think she’d swam away underwater, like in the swimming pool, and had been breathing underwater, like in the bathroom?”

“Later I did, not right then. Everything happened so fast. I told someone to call the lifeguard and I ran into the water after her. There was no time to do anything else.”

Tom began to speak faster, his tone more and more agitated.

“The sea was calm and I swam quickly. I got past the parents who were chasing Sim Cheong and caught up to her first. I knew I had to act fast in case the current pulled her right out to sea. I caught hold of her arm, turned her away from me and cupped my hand under her chin in a rescue position, but to my surprise, she tried to wriggle out of my grasp. I told her to keep still and I put my other arm around her waist to keep hold of her, but still she fought to get away from me.”

He stopped talking and began to cry again.

“Then, in the struggle, she managed to turn herself around and face me. Doctor Summers, Sim Cheong’s body suddenly felt different in my arms, all skin and bone and angular, and I swear that for a split second, I saw a different face, the face of an old woman, wrinkled and haggard, her eyes all sunken, and then Sim Cheong’s childish face returned. I got such a fright that I lost my hold and she kicked away from me. As she swam away, she shouted that I mustn’t try to save her. She was going back to the sea, so that I would be alright.”

“And then you lost her.”

“Yes. It looked like she deliberately let herself go under the water.”

Tom wept openly now.

“I tried!” he cried out, “I swam after her but she’d disappeared. I dived down after her, again and again. So did the parents who’d caught up with me. We tried so hard to locate her, but by the time the lifeboat came, she was gone.”

Doctor Summers stood up and walked round the desk. He pulled up a chair, sat down and put his hand on Tom's shoulder.

"Listen to me. I can't even begin to imagine how you must be feeling because this little girl drowned, but the police have already indicated that they think it was a tragic accident. I understand you feel responsible, but everyone knows you did your best to try to save her."

Tom sat up sharply and looked at the doctor.

"I'm not bothered about if I'm in trouble! It's about how I feel in here!" he shouted, pounding on his chest. "If I'd listened to you and gone sick, stayed home, I wouldn't have been there in the first place. She wouldn't have met me, realised I was ill and decided to swim into the sea to help me. If I hadn't got a fright when I saw her face change, I might have kept hold of her."

"And if you *had* gone sick, another teacher would have taken care of your class," said Doctor Summers. "They would still have gone on their beach trip, Sim Cheong might still have swum out to sea, if she was determined to, and the outcome might still have been the same. Sadly, we'll never know."

The doctor paused and spoke more gently.

"But Tom, I firmly believe you imagined the things you've described to me because of the pressure of your tumour. You tried your best to save Sim Cheong, and it's going to be hard enough dealing with losing her, without believing in some 'grand scheme' from the universe in which a seven-year-old had been given the job of sacrificing herself for you. What you thought you experienced, at that moment in the sea, was all fabricated by your illness."

"And if you're wrong?"

"In my professional opinion and experience, Tom, I'm not wrong. You should go home, rest, take all the professional help you can get to deal with this tragedy and focus on your treatment."

Tom stood up. Doctor Summers kept his hand on Tom's shoulder until he felt sure he seemed calm.

"I'll call you when I get today's MRI results. Until then, please take care of yourself."

"I don't care about myself."

Doctor Summers watched as Tom closed the door behind him, then he stood up and stared out of the window. As the world carried on outside, he felt a terrible sadness at the injustice which was sometimes meted out to people. Just then, the phone rang.

"Doctor Summers, it's Joan, from radiography."

"Oh, hello, Joan."

"I've just emailed you the pictures from Tom Andrews' latest MRI, but in case you don't get them straight away, I wanted to call and tell you about something I noticed."

As Doctor Summers listened to Joan's news, he sank into his chair.

"I'm sorry, Joan. Could you repeat that?"

He listened, didn't reply, clutched the phone tightly.

"Doctor Summers? Are you still there?"

"Yes, sorry. I'll have to go, Joan. I must call Tom immediately."