The Kelpies

“If I ever needed to hide a dead body, I would bury it in Scotland,” Monica said.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Nathan replied. The landscape was too majestic. To his right were large rolling plains filled with enough sheep to make an insomniac drowsy. The view out his window to his left was the perfect opposite--dismal enough to be the setting of one of his nightmares. The dichotomy was staggering, but he much preferred the view to his immediate right. By strategically removing his backpack when she walked by, Nathan had finally gotten Monica to sit next to him. It had only taken three bus rides.

“Yeah, I guess that would be kind of weird,” Monica replied, closing her eyes and nodding her head to her music.

“I’m not saying the killing is weird, or anything,” Nathan explained hastily. Monica frowned, her eyes still closed. “Or rather, not I’m not saying you’re weird or anything.” Monica forced her eyes open. “For wanting to kill people, that is.”

“You’re one of those people who like to talk on the bus, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Well, yeah. We’re cooped up in here for hours, but we’re cooped up. Seems like we’re meant to talk or do something. We spend enough time on our own or on our phones.”

“Ok.” Monica took off her headphones and put her phone back in her pocket. “Where would you hide a dead body?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t. First rule of hiding something: somebody’s going to find it. Have to burn it or melt it or feed it to a dog or something. And I wouldn’t tell anybody, either.”

“What about your therapist?”

“I’ll get one who’s also a lawyer, and then we have attorney-client privilege.”

“Wow, you really have this all planned out.”

Nathan shrugged. “I’m just meticulous that way, I guess. When a crisis happens, whether it necessitates murder or another plan, you probably won’t have time to think things through then.”

“Nothing’s ever as urgent as all of that. If you live your life constantly worried about the future, how can you live life?”

“Prepared.”

“Well, that’s no fun.” Monica leaned forward so she could see out the window. She looked at the open field and could almost feel the wind blowing through her luxurious mane. Her hair was a lovely shade of ruby red, a rare complement for her sapphire blue eyes.

“What do you worry about?” Nathan asked her.

“That I’m going to be on this bus forever,” Monica sighed.

“You normally just sleep through this part, huh?”

“Only on good days.”

“Well you can go back to sleep if you want. Sorry to disturb you.” Nathan turned away and scanned the bus for anyone he could strike up a conversation with, but most people were either couples or asleep. He listened for a topic that wouldn’t be awkward for him to third wheel in, but Monica tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention back.

“You’re not disturbing me.” She smiled seducingly. “Plus, you can certainly hold a conversation.”

“Well, thanks for that. The pressure, I mean. None of the topics I had planned seem suitable now.”

“Ok, well then I’ll pick.” She hummed as she thought. “What disturbs you?”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Horses.”

“I said seriously.”

Nathan looked down at his old Converse. “I was being serious.”

Monica scratched her right eyebrow. “What do you have against horses?”

Nathan started playing with his laces. “When I was three, my parents took me to go see Equus. They thought it would be a family friendly experience, like *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, my favorite movie at the time. It wasn’t.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. But one bad experience shouldn’t have ruined your budding love of horses.”

“It wasn’t an *experience*, it was a nightmare. The lighting was demonic, and the horses were portrayed as absolutely satanic. As a three year old, I couldn’t really comprehend mental illness at the time, so I thought the horses were either possessing Alan or forcing him to have sex, and I didn’t even know what sex was at the time!” Some couples looked over at Nathan, and the guy behind him that had been kicking his seat woke up. “So, yes, it was a nightmare.”

“I’m guessing the nightmares didn’t stop there.”

“No, they personified. I would be visited by a midnight black mare in my dreams who would whisper awful things to me, and then trample me over with her hooves.”

“That’s not the worse way to go out.”

“You’re right, I suppose I could have been drawn and quartered.”

Monica held back a laugh. “Seriously though, I have one question. You know where this bus is going right.”

“Yes, I am aware of the irony of the situation.”

“The Kelpies are horse heads.”

“I know.”

“Giant horse heads.”

“I said I know.”

Monica shrugged. “Well as long as you know.”

“I do.” Monica let out a monstrous yawn, showing teeth that were so big they were all the better to eat you with. “Speaking of big,” Nathan joked.

“Oh stop it. They’re not even mine.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re fake. Look away for a second.” Nathan looked out the window and saw some horses galloping, *sinisterly.* Monica tapped him on the shoulder, making some noises that roughly equated to “Look, see?” Her top four teeth were missing and just her raw gums were showing. She nodded back to the window and Nathan glared at the horses again. Instead of a tap on his shoulder, he received a head. “It’s okay if I lay on you, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Nathan stammered out.

“The real reason I sleep on buses is because they make me tired.” She let out another yawn. “You should get some sleep, too. Hopefully you don’t get any nightmares about horses.” Monica closed her eyes and her breathing slowed down until Nathan assumed she was asleep. He thought that he would be too electrified by the weight of Monica’s head resting on his shoulder, but sooner or later he too drifted off.

And he did have a nightmare about horses.

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The bus pulled up and Nathan was disappointed to see that the heads were even bigger than he would have thought. “That’s just a little excessive,” he remarked. But the park around it was worth the bus ride. Great landscaping, and a lot of paths you could explore leading who knows where. But he wanted to find out. One path in particular drew his eye. Its bridge looked like the creepy, creaky wooden pathway to a children’s fantasy land. It rounded a bend nearly immediately, so there was no telling what was on the other side. It could have been anything from Narnia to Land of the Houyhnhnms. He was still eyeing the path as their guide explained that the statues were meant to be the heads of horses buried underground.

“Can you imagine what it would be like to be trapped underground?” Monica asked him.

“Yes, I have a pretty active imagination.”

“That’s for sure,” she replied and turned back towards their guide.

“Now the reason they’re called the Kelpies is a good story,” the guide continued. “The sculptures are not actually of horses, but of a mythological creature. Can anyone guess what the name of this creature was?”

“A Kelpie,” one of the chaperones yelled from the back after some groans.

“Exactly, and Kelpies have the ability to shapeshift. Their most common form being horses. They had the strength of ten horses and would wait by the sides of bodies of water and drag men in.”

“If they have that much strength, seems like a rather inefficient way to kill someone,” Nathan criticized.

“Kelpies like to play with their food,” Monica answered.

“Seems malicious.”

“Seems fun. I do it sometimes,” Monica replied, winking at Nathan.

“Don’t make that face. You look like a Bluth.”

“What face would I rather I make?”

“This one’s fine.”

“This one it is.”

Nathan cast another glance at the bridge.

“We can go over there, you know.”

Nathan turned to make a rebuttal, but Monica had already started walking over to the bridge. The sway of her hair and hips overcame his hesitation, and his feet followed her.

The group followed the tour guide inside one of the Kelpies, but Nathan followed Monica on her guided tour. She pointed out interesting flora that they found on the way to the bridge as Nathan half-listened. After many beads of sweat and glances back to see if anyone was yelling at them, they arrived at the bridge.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Monica asked, her foot hovering in the air above the bridge.

“Yes, what is the worst that could happen?” Nathan asked, while wondering what the best that could happen was. His whole life could change. He took one last uncomfortable look at the Kelpies, and then gave a nod to Monica. Her foot stamped down with a satisfying creak, and they began their journey across the bridge.

With each step, Nathan’s walk grew more and more unnatural. He was glad that Monica was in front of him, he must have looked like some monster impersonating a human. Halfway across the bridge, he had to keep reminding himself to breathe. He felt like he was losing his balance, and since the rails were too rickety and splintered to hold, he had only the image of Monica to stabilize himself. Beneath the bridge, the grey water rushed. But, rotten plank by rotten plank, Nathan made his way to the other side.

“See, that wasn’t so hard?” Monica teased him when he joined her. “Shall we continue, or do you need a breather?”

“No, I am good to go.” If Nathan wasn’t ready to go now, he never would be. Nathan set about mentally preparing himself for every scenario. He rubbed his arms in case of any dramatic changes in weather. He took inventory of his pockets for potential trinkets he could use to bribe creatures who had never seen humans before. He studied Monica for any distinguishing features he could use to pick her out of a lineup of imitation Monicas. Her height, her breast size, her shade of hair, her position of freckles, her smoky eyes? Nathan was definitively sure that she had not been wearing any eye shadow on the bus, but she must have woken up before him and put on some before they got off the bus. That was possible, his memory of everything that had happened since they pulled up Helix Park was fuzzy at best.

Monica rounded the corner and stopped. She turned back to Nathan, blinking her apparently smoky eyes apologetically. “Sorry, Nathan. There’s nothing here.”

Nathan made his own way around the bend and saw a dead end. No fantasy lands, no damsels in distress, and no mythical creatures as far as he can tell. Even the normal, everyday path ended, as the canal once again took over. It was too big to cross, and nothing on the other side looked particularly interesting, anyway. “I expected this,” he confessed.

“Really?”

“I expect everything.”

“Well I don’t. I don’t know what I was expecting, but something that was worth the walk over here, surely.” She stamped her foot down.

“It is all about the journey, not the destination. And the company. Do you really think I came all of this way to see some horse monuments?”

Monica brushed her midnight hair out of her face, fully revealing her smile. “What’s that over there?” she asked, pointing towards the water.

Nathan followed her arm and approached the water, not seeing the hole in the ground until it was almost too late. “Well this is interesting,” he commented in a grave tone. “What do you think it is?”

He got a whinny back in response.

Nathan turned back around and there she was, the midnight black horse who continued to haunt his nightmares. The Night Mare.

“That explains some discrepancies I was noticing,” Nathan commented.

The Night Mare spoke independently of the movement of her mouth. “I would say I’m sorry I had to deceive you for so long, but that was where the fun was. I did tell you I liked playing with my food.”

“So this is it, then? You’re going to eat me?”

“That was just a figure of speech, Nathan. Don’t take everything so seriously.”

“Right, your species likes to drown its prey. Well I’m not about to ride you until you submerge me in a pool of water and kill me.”

“You would have if I were a girl.” She pranced closer to Nathan. “Besides, the tour guide’s information was a little outdated. The temptation, the drowning, all of it was too quick. When you have been alive as long as I have, your pursuits need to last as long as possible. So instead of seducing some sot in a second, we stretch out the corruption for a lifetime, subliminally terrorizing children and then when we get older—“ she took her final step forward and reared backed ferociously, knocking Nathan into the pit. “We savor the fruits of our labor. In our past, we got one thing right. The deprivation of oxygen is a beautiful death. Although with drowning the beauty was too ephemeral, especially to eternal beings like us.” She breathed in deeply. “This is much more our speed.” The beast moved her head around in the dirt until she found a string. When she tugged on it, the lid of the casket that was hidden in the dirt swung shut. Nathan tried to force it open, but dirt had already begun to pile up on top of the lid. In his last moments, he gasped desperately for air until he lost all feeling.

And then he woke up, still gasping, and felt too much.

“What’s wrong, Monica asked him?”

“I just had a terrible nightmare, nothing I am not used to. I do not know if I can stand to look at horse sculptures just yet, though.”

“Well you still have some time to recover,” she said. “We’re still thirty minutes away. As for me, though, I’m going to take a nap.” She leaned back onto Nathan’s shoulder and closed her smoky eyelids.