

Julie, In The River

by Luisa Ensslin

6 Years Old

Izzy Henderson had always talked to her reflection. So it made sense when one day, her reflection talked back.

Izzy was lying on her belly, peering down at the freckly brown-haired girl in the water. The small river flowed through the valley below the Henderson family cottage. A slope full of trees, rustling with summer leaves, hid Izzy- and the river- from the house.

"Hello," Izzy said, just in case the river wanted to tell her something.

The girl in the water rippled. "Hello."

If Izzy had been any older, she would have thought she was imagining things. But 6-year-olds imagine things every day, so she was only surprised for a moment.

"What's your name?" Izzy asked.

"My name is Julie," the girl replied.

"Why are you in the water, Julie?" Izzy was sure no one could hold their breath that long.

"I'm dead," Julie replied. Izzy frowned. She had never met someone who was dead before. Her mother had said Granddad was dead, but Izzy couldn't remember him very well.

Finally, Izzy asked, "does it hurt?"

Julie shrugged. "Not physically."

"What's fizz- fizz- fizzily?" Izzy wondered. Julie must be older than she looked if she knew big-kid words like that.

The girl in the water frowned. "... Never mind. Who are you?"

"I'm Izzy, age 6. I have a bunny called Dinka, and my favourite colour is yellow."

Julie stared at her. "You're only 6?"

"Yes. But next June I'll turn 7."

"Well, you're better than nothing," said Julie. "Come talk to me every day, will you? I'm bored."

7 Years Old

Izzy bounced in her car seat. Her legs felt achy from sitting so long, and there wasn't anything to do.

Her mother sighed. "Be patient, Izzycakes. We're almost there."

"But you said that already! Ages ago!"

"Well, this time we really are almost at the cottage. And then you can get out of the car, and we'll start making supper, and maybe we'll go floating in the lake this evening. How does that sound?"

"But I wanna do all that *right now*." Izzy kicked at the back of the seat in front of her.

"Stay calm," said her father. "Look, we're here." The car's wheels crunched onto the gravel driveway.

As soon as the car had parked in front of the cottage, Izzy jumped out, and started down the slope to the river. "Come back soon!" her mother called.

"Okay!" Izzy replied.

Izzy stopped at the riverbank. "Julie?" she said. "Are you still here?" She glanced down. Of course: there was Julie, in the water. She was frowning. "Why are you grumpy?" Izzy asked.

"It's been *months*," Julie snapped. "Why did you never come talk to me? For a while, you came every day!"

"I couldn't come," said Izzy, slightly hurt. "I'm only here when it's summer."

Julie's face softened. "Oh, you're a cottager? I was, too."

"Which cottage did you have?" Izzy asked. She knew there were a bunch of cottages nearby, with driveways branching off of the main driveway. There was the blue cottage, the one called Owl's Perch, the one with the bear statue, the one with the mean dog... Izzy hoped *that* wasn't Julie's cottage.

"I stayed at Waterbank Down," Julie replied.

Izzy thought for a moment. "I don't know that one."

Julie shrugged. "Oh, well."

"Izzy!" Izzy could hear her mother calling from up at the cottage. "Come and set the table!"

"I have to go," Izzy told Julie.

Julie frowned. "Fine."

"Mommy," Izzy asked, as she laid out the cutlery, "are there any cottages nearby called Waterbank Down?"

Her mother shook her head. "No, I don't believe so. Why?"

Izzy shrugged. "Julie told me about it."

"Julie?"

"The girl who lives in the river."

Her mother laughed. "Oh, I see."

Izzy decided not to tell anyone else about Julie. They wouldn't believe her.

8 Years Old

"Julie!" cried Izzy. "Guess what?" Izzy was at the cottage again, for the first time since last August. Julie, as always, was waiting in the river.

"What?" Julie sighed.

"I'm getting a brother." Izzy plopped down on the riverbank. "He's gonna be born in July."

Julie rolled her eyes. "Well, congratulations..."

"The thing is, though," said Izzy, trying to pretend that Julie cared more, "I don't know if I want a brother. In movies, brothers are mean."

Suddenly, Julie was interested. "Brothers *are* mean," she agreed. "You shouldn't want one. In fact," she added, "it's because of my brother that I'm dead."

Izzy swallowed. "What?"

"My brother was the reason I drowned," said Julie. "And here's my advice: don't trust your brother. Ever. In the water or out."

"You need to learn to swim, Izzy," said her mother.

Izzy poked at the green beans on her plate. "I don't want to."

Her mother, with arms crossed over top of her baby bump, looked at Izzy in surprise. "Why not?"

"I don't want to go in the water."

"But think about it! If you can swim, you can even swim out to the island in the middle of Clarence Lake."

Izzy shook her head. "No! I don't want to go in deep water. I might drown!" Izzy was close to tears now. What if her parents forced her?

"Izzy—"

"Don't make her do it." Her father's voice cut in front of her mother's words. He took a deep breath. "If she doesn't want to go in the water, she shouldn't have to. And the island isn't a good place for people to be messing around."

"If she falls in the water and doesn't know how to swim, what then? How will she help herself? She won't be able to," her mother insisted.

"She said she doesn't want to go in the water, so she won't go in the water. Treat her like an adult and let her decide."

"An adult?! She's only 8!"

"She won't swim unless she wants to."

"No, she'll drown instead!"

Izzy squished her mashed potatoes with her fork. She huffed loudly. Her parents didn't stop arguing. "I'm not going to swimming lessons," she said.

Her mother fell silent. Her father nodded. "Better to stay out of the water in the first place."

9 Years Old

By now, Izzy had completed 3rd grade. She was really sad when the school year ended, but there were other things to look forward to.

"Surprise!" Izzy cried, as she scrambled down the slope and peered into the water. "And did you know, I'm starting 4th grade this year."

Julie was silent for a moment.

"Are you—" Izzy began.

"I haven't seen you in months!" yelled Julie. "And then you come along, and you don't even say hello to me!"

A small wave slapped the bank of the river, and Izzy jumped back. "Hey!"

"And the only thing you can talk about is your stupid school!" Julie continued. "What about me? Don't you care?"

Another wave, bigger this time, hit the bank. A shower of droplets soaked into Izzy's pants. "Stop it!" Izzy cried. "I'm leaving!" She turned and ran up the hill towards the cottage.

"Izzy!" called her mother, as Izzy entered the house. "Have you unpacked yet?" Izzy shook her head. "Then go and do that, please."

Before going into her room, Izzy crept into her parents' bedroom and peered into the crib in the corner. Her brother Joseph, wearing a green onesie, was sleeping. His hair was fluffed up, and he was cuddling a large stuffed crocodile.

Izzy reached down and smoothed his hair. Joseph sighed, then opened his eyes and smiled up at her. Izzy grinned. She loved watching her brother snoozing, but he was even better when he was awake.

"Hi Jojo!" she said, lifting him out of the crib. "Aren't you glad we're at the cottage again?"

Joseph gazed at her.

"I'm glad to be back as well," Izzy continued. "Although... my cottage friend- her name is Julie- isn't being very nice. She splashed me." Izzy showed Joseph her pants leg, which still had dark splotches from the water. "But I guess I wasn't very nice either. I didn't say hello."

Izzy set her brother down on her parents' bed, and tickled him until he giggled. Julie was wrong about brothers: they were *the best*.

"Julie?" Izzy peered into the river. After yesterday's argument, Izzy had decided she should apologize. "Hello," said Julie. She wouldn't look Izzy in the eye. "I'm really sorry about yesterday," Izzy began. "I'll say hello next time, and try to listen to you more." Julie sighed. "I'm sorry too. I guess." Izzy knew this wasn't a very good apology, but it was enough. "Friends?" she asked. Julie shrugged. "Whatever."

10 Years Old

Soon, Izzy would be starting 5th grade. In September, actually, which was only a few months away. But for now, it was summer vacation, which meant she was at the cottage. She had helped unload the car, booped Joseph on the nose (he felt too big to be Jojo now), and dumped her duffle bag on her bed. She didn't want to unpack right away, though.

Instead, Izzy went down the slope, sliding a little in the rain-dampened earth, and leaned out over the water. Her new haircut made her hair nice and swishy, and she flicked her head.

"Showing off, are we?" asked Julie, and rolled her eyes.

"Hi," Izzy replied. "Sorry, I'm not trying to show off. I just like my hair."

Julie snorted. "It looks like something my mom would like. So fashionable."

Izzy shrugged. "My grandma has hair kind of like this too. But I don't care. The hairdresser said that a bob with bangs suits me."

"Totally... It looks gorgeous."

"I have to go," said Izzy. She felt kind of sad. Did Julie think her hair was dumb?

"Julie?" asked Izzy. "How did you, um, die?"

It was the middle of July now. Izzy's family was going home soon, and Izzy really wanted to know the answer before she left. Izzy talked to Julie almost every day, but Julie never talked for long, and it was always hard to tell if Julie was going to be friendly or not. On her good days, Julie talked (though grumpily). On her bad days, Julie was rude and sarcastic, and splashed water at Izzy. Izzy could only hope today was a good day.

Julie stared up at her for a moment.

"My brother convinced me to go swimming with him one evening," Julie said finally. "We swam all the way across the lake, turned around, and started swimming back. We stopped on the island for a quick break, and then kept going. By that time, it was dark. I realized I couldn't see my brother anymore, so I called out to him, and he called back, but I couldn't tell where he was. I kept calling, and he kept answering, but he seemed to come from everywhere. And finally, I couldn't swim any farther, and I *tried* to keep going, but I couldn't, so I drowned. And the next thing I knew, I was floating in this idiotic river." Julie glared at Izzy. "Now *go away*."

"Um, see you later," said Izzy, and hurried up the slope.

11 Years Old

"Izzy, where you going?" Joseph called, as she started down the slope to the river. "Me come too?"

"No, you have to stay here," she explained, and picked him up and carried him into the house. "I'll be back soon."

She hurried toward the river. Sometime last spring, it had come to her that Julie was always grumpier in the evenings. Better to come earlier than later.

"Hello," she said, as she reached the water.

Julie huffed. "Whatever."

"How are you?"

"Same as always, Izzy. Dead."

"Um, actually, can you call me Isabel? Izzy is too babyish."

"Too babyish for *what*?" Julie snapped.

"Um, junior high?" Isabel mumbled.

"*Junior high*?!"

"Well, I finished 5th grade," Isabel explained, "so I start junior high in September. And that's almost high school. I can't be almost in high school and still be called Izzy." Truthfully, she preferred Izzy to Isabel. But she had to grow up someday.

"I HATE THIS!" shrieked Julie. A wave exploded onto the bank, soaking Isabel's skirt and shoes.

"W-what?"

"*Everything*. Here I am, dead, and stuck in a weedy river. The only person I ever see is you, and you're gone for months at a time. Just a few years ago, you were 6, and suddenly you're 11. And calling yourself 'Isabel'! That's not your name to use; it belongs to my aunt. She was the *only* one who ever understood me. *YOU CAN'T STEAL HER NAME!*" A wave jumped over the bank and hit Isabel straight on. She stumbled back, gasping and dripping.

"I- I'm sorry," said Isabel. "I'll be Izzy from now on. Isabel is your aunt." Isabel felt her stomach fluttering as she spoke the lie. She *would* be Izzy- but only to Julie.

"Good!" barked Julie. "Keep it that way."

12 Years Old

"What do you do all day?" Isabel asked Julie.

Julie rolled her eyes. "I watch the fish. They're as boring as- ."

"Can you see the sky?"

"Only when you're here. Otherwise I just see the stupid river surface." A wave hit the riverbank, but not as hard as normal. "I was going to be a surgeon someday," Julie spat. "And now the *only* thing I ever do is wait!"

Isabel inched back from the river, out of splashing range. She had come home far too often with wet clothes (three times in the single week they had been at the cottage this summer), and she was running out of excuses: 'I went wading in the river.' 'I slipped in a puddle.' 'The trees dripped on me.'

Isabel wracked her brain for another topic. "Um, guess what? I, uh... had waffles for breakfast!"

"Big whoop," sneered Julie. "I don't care what you had for breakfast."

"I just... like waffles," said Isabel. "Don't you?"

Julie huffed. "They were my *brother's* favourite food, not mine. And I hate my brother."

13 Years Old

"Julie? Uh... hi," said Isabel.

"What took you so long?" barked Julie.

"I only just got here!" Isabel defended herself. "And it's been a year. Aren't you..." *Happy to see me*, Isabel almost said, but didn't. Instead, she asked, "how are you?"

"Sick of it all," said Julie. "And bored."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Don't you have anything interesting to say?" Julie asked.

"Um..." Isabel thought hard. "My dad has a picture of me standing in front of the Statue of Liberty," she started.

Julie huffed. "I've been to NY too. So I don't need to see your dad's stupid photograph."

"But I've never *been* to New York," Isabel explained. "I think my dad Photo-shopped it."

"Whatever," Julie sighed.

"Anyway, you're going to be a surgeon," Isabel tried again. "Why that job?"

Julie was silent for a moment. Then her eyes glowed with fury. "*Going to be?!*" Julie yelled. "*I'm never GOING TO BE anything.* I'll spend the rest of my existence in a river, going insane with boredom as I wait for each day to end. Every night is miserable; I just dream about all the things I lost. Don't you get it? *I HAVE NO FUTURE!*"

A wall of water pulled itself from the river and smashed Isabel backwards. Her shoulder thumped onto the ground, and she lay there, gasping, as the water receded.

Isabel slowly got to her feet. She was soaked through, and her elbow was bleeding from where she had scraped it on a rock.

"You can't do that," Isabel said.

"Can't do *what?*" spat Julie. "I'll do whatever I like."

"You can't shove me over like that!" replied Isabel. "That was mean, and it hurt. If you're hurting me, we can't be friends."

"Shut up!" Julie snapped. "You sound like my elementary school teacher."

"I won't 'shut up!'" said Isabel. "Why aren't you listening to me? You hurt me!"

"You sound like you're going to cry," Julie sing-songed. "Baby."

Isabel bit her lip. "I need to go home." She turned and hurried up the slope. *What should she do?* Julie was being nasty, but she was probably really stressed. But that still didn't make it okay... And Isabel's elbow was bleeding.

She reached the house and went in, pressing her elbow tight against her shirt to hide the wound.

"Hello, Isabel," said her mother. Then she gasped. "What happened to you?"

Isabel glanced down at herself. A muddy puddle was forming around her feet. "I slipped," said Isabel. "I slipped and fell in the river."

Her mother frowned. "Stay right there." She retrieved a towel from the bathroom, and wrapped it around Isabel's shoulders. "Isabel, darling: I don't know what you're doing down there, but this needs to stop. You're coming home soaking wet much too frequently. Have you been teaching yourself to swim?"

Isabel shook her head. "No!"

"Then what *are* you doing?"

"Um..."

Her mother sighed. "Fine. Don't tell me. But you're forbidden from going to the river alone."

Isabel gaped. "For how long?"

"Indefinitely."

Many times that summer, Isabel found herself gazing at the tree-filled slope. She couldn't see the river, yet she knew somehow that Julie was still there, waiting. Many times, Isabel was tempted to sneak away to the river, and talk to her. But rules were rules.

At least, that's what Isabel kept telling herself.

14 Years Old

"When are we gonna *be* there?" Joseph moaned as they drove along.

Isabel patted his shoulder. "We're almost there, I promise. See the sign for Hampton? That means 15 more minutes until we reach the cottage."

For a few minutes, Joseph was quiet, and then he started thumping his feet into the back of their father's seat.

"Joseph, enough," said their mother.

"Hmph," Joseph grumbled. "I don't want to drive anymore. I want to be there already."

"How about we play Twenty Questions?" Isabel suggested.

Joseph frowned, then nodded.

"Start guessing," prompted Isabel.

"Is it me?"

"No."

"Is it..."

After 36 questions, Joseph discovered the person: his Pre-Primary teacher, Ms. Gupta. "I'm bored again," he mumbled.

"Don't worry, we're almost—" The car turned into the gravel driveway, and suddenly, it was raining. Their father turned on the windshield wipers as drops exploded on the front window.

"That's crazy," their mother muttered. "It was sunny just a minute ago."

The car pulled up outside the cottage. Their mother hopped out and dashed around to the trunk to retrieve the rain jackets.

After bringing everything inside, they all sat down in the living room. "Looks like we should break out the board games," their mother suggested.

"But I want to go swimming!" Joseph whined.

"Look outside," said their mother, gesturing to the window. Rain poured from the sky, and droplets bounced off the wooden deck. "This is not weather for swimming."

Joseph had started taking swimming lessons last fall, but Isabel had said no. She still didn't feel ready to face the water. And yet, what was holding her back? Only a deep fear of drowning.

It didn't stop raining the next day, or the day after that. Joseph and Isabel played countless rounds of Othello, checkers, Payday, and The Game of Life. Everyone was getting a bit grumpy.

Their mother sighed and pursed her lips as she checked the weather. "The forecast said it was supposed to be sunny today, with a high of 25..."

Isabel looked up from her book and stared out at the rain. "Maybe it will be?"

Joseph knocked over his Jenga tower, and wooden blocks spilled across the rug. "It always *falls down!*" he huffed. He punched at a throw pillow lying on the floor.

"Joseph, stop that!" Isabel reprimanded.

"Leave him be," said their father. "It's just cabin fever."

"I have cabin fever!" Joseph sang. "I have cabin fever!"

"Joseph," asked Isabel, "do you want to play Hide-And-Seek?"

"Yes. I want to seek."

"Okay," said Isabel, putting her book on the coffee table. "Close your eyes and count to 25."

There weren't very many places to hide in the cottage, but the attic was pretty good. Isabel went upstairs, climbed the ladder, and crawled across the dusty floor.

"22, 23," counted Joseph. Isabel slid behind a bunch of wooden planks propped against the wall, and sat down. "25!" Joseph called.

Isabel waited. She could hear him running around downstairs, looking for her. She trailed a finger along one of the boards. Noticing it had writing on it, she tilted her head to read it:

WATERBANK DOWN

So this wasn't just a board, then. It was a sign.

Suddenly, Isabel remembered: "*Which cottage did you have?*"

"*I stayed at Waterbank Down,*" replied Julie.

Izzy frowned, thinking. "*I don't know that one.*"

"*Oh, well,*" said Julie, with a sigh.

But Isabel did know Waterbank Down. The river was just downhill from the cottage. The sign had been here all along, in the attic. *This was Julie's cottage.* She had eaten here, slept here, and laughed here. Was she the one who had broken the living room doorstop? Had she sat on the same bench on the deck? Had she drowned in the nearby Clarence Lake?

Joseph climbed into the attic. "Isabel?" Then he grinned. "Found you!"

Isabel crawled out of her hiding spot. "Can we finish the game another time?" she asked. "I need to use Mommy's computer."

Julie Clarence Lake Drown pulled up only a few results. Isabel clicked on the top one:

Hey ghost story lovers ,welcome back. Today I'm talking about a girl who drowned in Clarence lake she was only 16 years old when she drowned. Her name was Julie, I do not know her last name. She died on August ninth in 1989. This date has special necromany power because you can write it like this and it a palindrome: 9/8/89. Who knows what might happen to a spirit who died then.

Isabel bit her lip. She felt... slightly angry at the article for writing about Julie like that, as though she were nothing more than a spirit mixed up with necromancy. She closed the article and typed in the address for the Hampton Herald website. She opened up the archive, and searched for the newspaper from the week after August 9th, 1989. On the third page, she found what she was looking for:

JULIE HENDERSON, a local cottager,
drowned in Clarence Lake on Aug.
9th. Her body has not been recovered.
Deeply missed by friends and family.

Isabel's last name was Henderson, too.

"Mom, Dad?" Isabel said. "I'm going for a walk."

Her mother nodded. "That's fine."

Isabel donned her raincoat and rubber boots, and left the cottage, stepping out the door into a wide puddle. Water poured from the eaves-trough, splashing into an overflowing barrel. Isabel started down

the road, passing the driveways for Owl's Perch and the cottage with the bear statue. As soon as she was out of sight of the Henderson cottage- Waterbank Down, she corrected- she darted into the trees.

Isabel doubled back towards the house, pushing through the forest behind Owl's Perch. Then she ran down the slope to the water.

Usually placid, the river was muddy and roaring from the rain. Periodic waves leaned over the bank, slamming into trees and rocks and dragging back whatever they could.

"Julie?" Isabel called. "Julie? Are you there?"

"I've figured it all out," said Julie.

"Figured what out?" Isabel asked. "I've figured something out too; we're--"

"Listen!" Julie barked. "That picture of you at the Statue of Liberty? That's not you; it's me. We look *that similar*. I've been to New York, and you haven't. And guess what? The only person who had that picture was my brother. *YOUR FATHER KILLED ME!!!*" Julie screamed. A column of swirling water rose from the river, with Julie wrapped in the centre. "*AND YOU KNOW WHY YOU EXIST? BECAUSE OF A MURDERER!*"

"That's not true!" Isabel yelled. "My father would never murder anyone! He was upset when Dinka died, so he *must* care about his sister!"

"*HE DOESN'T CARE AT ALL!*"

"He keeps a picture of you, Julie, on his nightstand! He misses you every day!"

"*NO!*" shrieked Julie. A tsunami surged from the river, grabbing Isabel, and tumbling her upside down. Her head crashed into the bank, and the tsunami receded. Isabel lay stunned, half in the water. Slowly but surely, the river current tugged her in.

Julie watched as Izzy sank into the river. The girl was taller than she had expected, and wow, those were really ugly pants.

Julie floated closer. Bubbles drifted up from Izzy's lips, and she was clawing weakly at the water. 'Clawing weakly'. That sounded so stupid. But whatever; it was true.

Why wasn't Izzy saving herself? Did she not know how to swim? Izzy was going to drown soon; ironically in Julie's river. At least Julie would no longer be alone down here. Julie smirked. It was kind of fitting: even if her brother was still alive, his daughter was paying the price.

Would Izzy be annoying, though? Julie had never wanted kids. They were snotty, loud, and clingy. Izzy was a teenager, but she wasn't very old. And if you dressed like a kid, you *were* a kid. Of course, Izzy wasn't Julie's child (ew), but Izzy was her niece. And honestly, Aunt Isabel had been much more of a mother than Julie's *actual* mom.

The bubbles had stopped. Izzy was struggling near the river bottom now. She had only seconds left. But- was it fair, Julie wondered. She hated being trapped in the river. *Hated* it. And Izzy would be stuck down here because of Julie. All because of Julie.

Julie dove to the bottom. Grabbing Izzy's arm, she tugged her out and pulled her to shore.

Air. It was air. It tasted wonderful.

Julie sank to the bottom of the river and sat down on a rock. There was no doubt Izzy would abandon her again. Julie kicked at a fish.

The world sucked.

Isabel got into big trouble for sneaking to the river. But she knew she deserved the grounding. After all, her parents *had* told her not to go, but she had disobeyed them and returned half-drowned.

"Isabel, why?" her mother asked. "What is it about that river? Why do you keep going down there?"

Isabel hesitated for a moment. Then she looked to her father. Julie was his sister. He should know.

She opened her mouth, and told them everything.

Julie hated it all. Izzy, the stupid fish, drowning, being forgotten. Ugh, being forgotten. That was the worst one. It had been two days since Izzy had come to see her. *By now*, thought Julie, *she's probably terrified of me. I almost killed her. I'm such an idiot.*

Julie waited. No one came.

But on the morning of the third day, Izzy's face appeared in the sky above the river.

"Julie?"

Izzy hated her. That's what she must have come to say.

"*What?*" Julie growled.

"I- I've brought my father, your brother. I thought you might- might want to see him."

Julie bit her lip. "Fine."

A man's face appeared with Izzy's. He was tanned, bearded, and tired, but Julie could still see her brother Max in this person's eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Julie," he said.

Isabel took a step back from the river to give her father and Julie some space. They were both crying now, but they were talking too, and that was a start.