You Watched Them Drown

Alice let the water run over her hands for longer than usual. But like fire was to a dry forest, water was to her, menacing. She snapped her hands back, shut off tap and dried her hands.

An early morning storm had delivered a mash up of fog, rain, sleet and lastly snow. Gazing out the window into the undisturbed snow, she let out a heavy sigh. It will be a bitch to drive in, she decided.

She turned to the hob, investigated the frying pan, and smiled; her teddy bear pancakes were legend now, at least they were to her five-year-old. The giggled dialogue of Bluey the cartoon puppy drifted from the lounge TV as she gingerly lifted the golden-brown bear, mindful of its ears.

“Sam, teddy’s ready!” she called out while clearing a spot on the table from the army of Legos that, too her, were just angry foot soldiers brandishing miniature bayonets. Having already stepped on one earlier, she had decided she wouldn’t miss them once he was grown.

“Sam!” She moved back to the counter, poured a cup of tea, sipped while she gazed out the window, then called out again. “Don’t make me come and get you,” more giggles, “if you hurry you can make a magic snow angel.” She placed her cup near his little plate, the teddy’s chocolate chip eyes staring up at her and felt a pin prick in her heart.

“Come on, you know it’s a mummy workday,” she said drifting into the lounge. Empty. The hiding game. She began searching, starting with the back of the lounger, then moved around the room, flipping curtains open, straining over the back of the sofa. Nothing. The downstairs toilet. Empty. Up the stairs, frustration rising, enough already. One more late warning at work and she was on the chopping block. The toilet, empty. Her room, closet, under the bed. Nothing. More frustration. “Sam. It’s not funny anymore,” she repeated while scouring his bedroom. Empty. She swooped around the entire upstairs again, then hurried down the stairs, her feet only catching every second step. *That little boy. The one who* … she smothered the visions of the newspaper articles. Sam was here, somewhere. She moved more quickly now, sweat pearls beading down her face. Her voice cracking. “Sam, for christsake.” She flung open the front door. “Sam!” her voice now somewhere between a howl and a scream. *Don’t take your eyes off them*. The warning flashed in her brain.

Now running from one front garden to the other she suddenly froze. Dead silence met her ears. She looked down at her feet, and registered it was only her footsteps embossed in the virgin snow.

“SAM! And with her desperate cries, lights in the street began to pop on. Maisie and Fred’s first. Followed by Ken and Mia, across the street. She circled the street again, slipping in the layer of unwelcome snow, then headed back towards her house. She needed to call the police before it was too late. Like last year. *The boy in the paper*. And as she reached her door, Ken fell in behind, his breath ghosting as he reached out to her. She spun around; her eyes terror stricken.

“Thank god you’re here! It’s Sam. I can’t find him anywhere.” But as she looked into his eyes something invisible pierced her chest, like a physical blow and she grabbed at it. Ken reached out but she violently shoved his arms away, then backed up until the door was at her back. Ken spoke softly.

“Alice. Remember. Try to remember when ….” But his words were smothered by her violent shrieking.

“No. Stop it!”

“Alice, the accident. Last year. You need to remember.”

“Get away from me.” Shoving at his chest, she dropped to her knees. Images flashed, his little body sinking, his lungs filling with water, his crystal blue eyes searching for her.

“Why didn’t I wake up. It was my fault he …?”

“It wasn’t your fault, Alice. It was an accident; please try to remember.”

“It wasn’t an accident.” She cried out. The words punctuated with heavy sobs. “It was NOT an accident.”