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Sowing the Wind

I walk down the concrete steps to the bay, carrying a basket in one hand and Chelsea on my hip. Teddy walks behind me, dragging a blow-up dinghy.

_Not too close to the steps Teddy, I say, or Shells will be up and down all day._

We move along the beach and step down over the wall of timber sleepers. Teddy takes the dinghy to the water’s edge, filling a bucket with sand to weigh it down. I place Chelsea on the sand and shake out the towels. _Beautiful day_ , I say, looking up at the sky.

When we are settled on the towels, I pass Chelsea some grapes. Teddy peels the lid from a container of dip and reaches into the basket for some biscuits.

_You’re a grape-guts Miss Shells_ , I say, pretending to eat her chubby thigh, making chomping noises as I huddle over her, kissing her and nibbling her leg. Grape juice drizzles down her chin, and she belly-chuckles.

_Mum?_

_Sorry about last night, I say, I shouldn’t have thrown the plate._

_Doesn’t matter._

_Dad needs to …_

_I hate him._

_Hate is exhausting._

I sift sand and shell grit between my fingers.

_Do you know it's your birthday?_ Teddy helps himself to an olive, offers me one.

_I shrug._

_Teddy spits the olive onto the sand. That's disgusting_ , he says.

_I LOVE those._

_He rubs his nose, says: What's inside the olives?_ Pimento.

_Pi-what?_ It’s a pepper, I say laughing.
The incoming tide laps my fingertips and the sand whips my face. I wake up, coughing sandy grit. The dinghy skips over the water like a smooth, flat stone. Chelsea’s bottle and the leftover picnic lunch are strewn around the basket. I stand, suddenly and clumsily, looking back toward the road and then out to the water.


TEDDY! CHELSEA!

I turn and sprint back along the beach, puffing and yelling. I leap up the concrete steps to the roadside, looking left and then right along the highway, yelling their names. Nothing.

Descending the steps in pairs, I bump into a woman, on the way up with her dog. I knock her hard against the bluestone wall. Spying the dinghy, further out now, I run to the water, splashing through the shallows and crying hysterically, screaming my children’s names.

When I am thigh-deep in water, I look back to the shore. The woman is brushing sand from her pants in abrupt, smacking strokes, muttering to her dog on a leash, watching me.

I plunge in. The water is freezing. The dinghy is now only a flash of yellow, hopscotching over the white-capped waves. I swim in the direction of the dinghy but I can barely see it anymore. It skitters over the water like a small yellow bird, airborne one moment, duck diving the next.

I realise that my children couldn’t be in the dinghy if it is flying around like that. I swim back towards the shore, back to where I can wade and then run. Their names are distorted by my wailing. My words are barely recognisable. The breath has been sucked out of me. I am winded.

The woman approaches the water’s edge as I get close to shore. I charge past her to the picnic, holding the stitch in my side.

She says: What’s wrong?
I vomit violently, gasping breath between explosions. The black labrador sniffs and licks at the vomit. Get out of it Pony, says the woman. She turns to me: What's wrong?

My children, I say, straightening up, wiping my nose and gasping for air. I can't find them.

Sow the wind; reap the storm, she says.

What did you say?

Oh nothing. I'm not sure why that came to me just now. I'll call the police, shall I?

*

I sit in the interview room, looking around, taking the place in, reading the Police Code of Ethics — strive to serve with integrity and blah.

The policeman is suspicious of me. He says that my story does not add up, but not all stories do, even when they're true. The policewoman is following his lead.

She says: May I call you Annie?

Okay, I say. I'm thinking she can call me whatever she wants, as long as she finds the children. Coles is by the book, green as.

Annie, we will tape this interview today, says Coles.

I should be at the beach, I say, moving my hands from the table to my lap, and then back again. How long will this take?

Well that depends, says Mills.

I stand up, clenching my fists over the back of the chair.

We'll be as brief as possible, says Mills, SIT DOWN PLEASE.

He is treating me like a criminal. He thinks I've been sowing the wind for years.

Tell me about the last time you saw your children, says Mills, sipping his cup of coffee noisily.

I say: We had a picnic. Chelsea went to sleep. Did they get her little lamb from the beach?

What happened after the young one went to sleep?
She needs her lambly, I say. I have a spare one at the house.

Mills shifts his chair, scraping it noisily along the floorboards and bringing himself as close to the table as possible.

Teddy and I caught crabs near the sleeper-wall, I say. He doesn’t like to keep them out of the water long, so …

The sleeping-wall?

Sleeper, I say. Wood, I add, recalling the weather-beaten post against my back, the splintery brightness of the stars …

Groyne, says Mills, correcting me. They are called groynes. I pay no attention to him because I’m thinking about that first night with Dean. I’m wondering why, even then, I knew to hold on to the post, rather than to him. Groyne sounds like a made-up word anyway. Mills just wants to prove he’s smarter than Coles and quite frankly I think they’re both a bit behind the eight ball.

Mills gets in my face, he says: What time did the child go to sleep? He speaks slowly, calculating the impact of each word.

What? Oh, it must have been two, nearly two. She …

Coles narrows her eyes at me, brushing her silky hair away from her face: Does the baby often sleep at the beach?

I put my hand to my own hair, thick with sandy grit, waxy from the salt wind. I fix on Coles for just a moment and then I shift my gaze to the window, to the wind in the trees. In summer Chelsea sleeps under the umbrella so that Teddy can swim.

Coles refers to her notes. Teddy was not at school.

I already told you that.

Yes. Was he unwell?

No.

Why was Teddy home from school?

I said he could have the day off because he didn’t sleep very well. We had a fight …

What did you fight with Teddy about?

Not Teddy. Dean. My …