

“A Five Letter Word”

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Alice awoke to the whistling of the teakettle. She squinted at the clock. It was 4:15 AM, and she could hear her husband rustling in the kitchen below. Her foot inched over to feel the residual warmth in his empty space beside her. The open window had filled the room with an early morning chill; the damp ocean air swelled in her throat as she took a deep breath. Alice reached for her bathrobe and pulled on a pair of socks. Twisting her long, red hair up with a rubber band, she descended the stairs.

The kitchen glowed orange from the light over the sink. Her husband Gary sat at the table, coffee cup in hand. Yesterday’s paper was spread across the table, the crossword puzzle on top. He took a gulp from his coffee. Alice watched him pull out a pen from behind his ear.

“You’re up early,” he said. She kissed his unshaven cheek, bristles like sandpaper. She licked her lips; the taste of salt pricked her tongue. She took a mug from the cabinet and filled it with steaming water from the kettle. The smell of green tea wafted up as the tea bag steeped. Alice sat across from him at the table. Somehow, they always ended up in the same seats. She reached over to retrieve a piece of crust from his toast. There was a pile of them along the rim of his plate. Gary never liked crusts, but that was her favorite part. She smiled, staring at her husband, dressed in his thick wool sweater, heavy boots up to his knees. He scratched at the stubble on his chin.

“What’s a five letter word for sorrow?” he asked. His brow was furrowed in concentration.

“Grief,” she replied, after a moment.

They’d been married for almost eight years. Alice first met Gary when he came by her house, the one that was now theirs, to purchase her father’s old lobster boat. The paint along the back of the boat was peeling then, where letters spelled out *My Alice* in block print. Gary questioned whom the boat had been named after, and her father pointed to the porch, where Alice sat reading in an old rocking chair.

She found him ruggedly handsome, skin already weathered by the sea. He loved her smile, and the way her hair glinted like fire in the sun. He’d repainted the boat, the name now bright, scrolling cursive along the stern. He said it brought him good luck, that she would always be with him when he went to sea.

Alice glanced toward the sink. The pile of last night’s dishes drew her attention. She stood up and stretched. Hot water ran over her hands as she filled the dishpan. From her station at the sink, she could see the ocean outside the tiny kitchen window. In the daybreak’s light she could barely make out the waves foaming over the rocks along the shore and the outline of Gary’s lobster boat. In a few more minutes, there would be enough light for her to see her name on its stern.

She heard the chair scraping back from the table.

“Busy day ahead of you?” Gary asked. He came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. The scent of seawater surged off him, frothing at the edge of her skin. She smiled, picking a spot of spaghetti sauce off the plate in her hands.

“Not really. I need to run a few errands. Pick up some groceries, mail a few things.”

“That sounds exciting.” He nuzzled his rough chin against her neck. It brought goose bumps to her skin. He placed his empty mug on the counter and smiled.

“Thanks, babe.” She turned, kissing him goodbye.

“I’ll be back before dark,” he said as he pulled on his jacket. “Love you.”

The door closed behind him. Alice listened to the crunch of his footsteps on the gravel get fainter and fainter as he walked toward the dock. She peered out the window, watching him gather up the bumpers and ropes, tossing them onto the boat. After a few minutes, the boat chugged to a start. She watched him disappear into the misty morning light.

Grey clouds had filled the sky. Alice’s old truck sputtered as it bounced down the dirt road toward the house. Paper bags full of groceries shifted against each other in the truck bed. In the distance, seagulls circled a lobster boat. She turned a corner, and through the trees she could see the outline of her house. The shape of a car in the driveway caught her eye. She leaned forward in the seat, squinting at the vehicle. The police officer saw her coming, and stepped off the front steps. Her breath hitched in her throat. She threw the car into park, leaving it idling as she rushed toward him.

“Officer?”

“Ma’am, are you the wife of Gary Black?”

“Yes...”

The officer took off his hat, a grim frown on his face.

“Would you like to step inside for a moment?”

“No. What’s wrong?” Bile rose in her throat.

“Ma’am, I regret to inform you that your husband’s boat was found drifting in Sheepscoot Bay. Upon boarding, we found no sign of your husband, and have reason to believe he may have been washed overboard. The coastguard is currently out looking for him.”

His voice blended with the sound of waves crashing against the rocks. Alice looked past him, out toward the water. A bright red boat was rolling on the swells in the distance. She could see the beam of a searchlight grazing the water’s surface. She fell to her knees. The gravel bit into her skin. When she closed her eyes, Gary’s face contorted, bubbles of air rushing to the surface. He reached toward her, the trail of traps pulling him into the water. Alice covered her face in her hands and started to scream.

Darkness. The kitchen clock ticked away the seconds. The oven timer had rung hours ago. Alice sat at her place, staring at the vinyl tablecloth. Across the table, the crossword puzzle was undisturbed, Gary’s pen on top, pointing to the only word filled in: *grief*.

“What’s a five letter word for sorrow?” she said to his empty chair. “Alice.”

Through the open window, she could hear the voices of fishermen down on the dock. Eventually she got up. She turned the oven off and scraped the cold food into the trashcan. She stared out the window. The sky was a deep shade of blue, almost black, and peppered with stars.

Alice slowly made her way out of the kitchen, turning off the lights on her way. She trudged up the stairs, each one creaking, and turned into the bathroom. She touched the cold glass of the mirror. Her reflection looked back at her. Gary's toothbrush lay on its side on the countertop. She ran her finger over it, unwilling to disturb the scene as Gary had left it.

Alice walked into their bedroom, closing the door behind her. Her hand ran along the worn quilt on the bed, smoothing away the small bumps in the fabric. She fumbled in the drawer of the nightstand to find a set of matches. Moving toward the window, she struck a match, holding it against the wick of a tall taper candle. She set the candle on the windowsill. Its light flickered against the glass, its reflection dancing along the window pane. She stared at the flame and saw Gary through the water, glimpsing the flickering sunlight dancing across the surface of the sea. He sank deeper and deeper through the frigid water into the darkness. Alice squeezed her eyes shut against the image.

She fell back onto the bed, her eyes closed. A sense of quiet fell over her. She curled her legs up against her chest, reaching a hand out to touch the empty space beside her. Cold. Her lips parted and she felt his name escape with her breath. Wind whistled outside her window. She heard a creak behind her. Hot breath on the back of her neck. A finger traced down her spine, then a pair of arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her into the darkness.

She could smell the sea.