

## The Sacrifice

He hugged Teddy tighter. Burying his face into the fur between its ears. It smelt of sticky sweets and home; a delicious smell that always soothed his fears. The fur was worn but still retained a softness that pampered his skin. He slowly twisted his head against the fabric allowing its caresses to sweep across his cheeks and lips. His fingers were gripped tight disappearing into the fur where his sharp nails dug into the soft stuffing. Teddy's left leg was in need of some repair, some white stuff leaking from its thigh, the leg hanging at an odd angle. Thomas soaked up the comfort like a sponge. It blocked out the chilling screams from the adults on the bank and the cries from the boy in the water. Noise flooded the air but Thomas stood completely still in a haze of protection all his own.

Drifting farther out, the boy's cries became stronger, pleading. Thomas peaked at him over the top of Teddy's head. The boy's eyes were wild, huge balls of white and black rolling in his head. He thrashed at the water with his hands, spumes of white spraying out churning the water into a bubbling cauldron. A witch's cauldron of black liquid. Thomas hid behind Teddy and shut his eyes tight. But he had allowed the image in, and now it played across the back of his eyelids. An adult bumped Thomas heavily in their bid to get closer to the bank. The shouts crashed in upon him forcing him to open his eyes. The boy in the water was just the same, boiling alive in a deep pot. For just a split second the boy's eyes fastened on Thomas and in that brief calm amidst the chaos, Thomas knew he had the power to make things better. Teddy would make things better.

Thomas stood with arms stretched wide, his face tilted up towards the sun. Crucified upon his cross, he flung Teddy high into the air, the bear flying, twisting in a slow arc and descending with gathering speed towards the cauldron. It plopped into the water right in front of the screaming child's face. The boy scooped it into his arms and suddenly everything was quiet. The boy's eyes steadied and the boiling ceased. Teddy wrapped in the child's arms had its face pressed into the water, its rounded back bobbing under the child's chin. Together they silently caught the current and moved swiftly down river. The adults too had suddenly grown quiet but as he saw the boy gather speed, the clamour erupted once again. Thomas blinked and pulled his arms in quickly. The whole ensemble was moving downstream and he couldn't see Teddy. Thomas started running, searching the water frantically for the blob of Teddy's back. He chased along the grassy path trying to keep up with Teddy's ride. Ahead of him a man had already waded out into the river, attempting to balance himself by hanging onto the branches of a fallen tree.

Thomas' heart raced as he watched the man reach for the boy. In slow motion the boy was twirled in a neat pirouette. He stretched out a hand and they connected. The man pulled him in towards the tree and as he did so, Thomas watched Teddy slip away and continue with the racing current. In horror he watched Teddy swirl out into the middle of the river and race ahead. Thomas ran hard. Behind him his mother screamed his name. On he ran always with one eye on the bear, it was lower in the water, only its bottom bobbing occasionally and spinning at the surface. Thomas reached the weir before Teddy and stood transfixed as the bear approached the smooth galaxy liquid edge. His mother grabbed Thomas hauling him roughly to her shoulder. Thomas clawed at the air, reaching as far as he could towards Teddy. The bear slid soundlessly over the edge and was lost in the churning mass below. Thomas screamed and beat his fists against his mother's shoulder.

Days afterwards when Thomas' photo appeared in the newspaper, teddies started arriving on the doorstep. A white one with a shiny red bow, a large brown one with sleepy eyes, one poked half way through the letterbox with a wonky nose. Even the cauldron boy's parents brought one, an exceptionally large one that filled one half of the sofa. Thomas sat and scowled while adults patted, kissed and coo-cooed. Then there were the cards, they littered the windowsills around the house, most had a picture of a teddy bear on the front. Thomas didn't like the teddies not even the soft brown fluffy one with the cute ears. The trouble was, Teddy could not, would not, should not be replaced. The time for bears was gone.