

Alice

By Julie MacKissock

Whenever he and I forget to remember why we love each other, Alice, our ghost is there.

Without her as a medium, we would have stopped talking a long time ago. In the car, driving towards the hospital in Davenport (the big one on Central Park), the thickness of the August heat beating down through the sunroof, all I had to say was “Alice would hate this,” and the tension between us broke.

“Alice would say we were idiots for trusting those white coats.” Jake sighed and his hands clutched the steering wheel as he squinted into the sun. I should not have let him drive. The cancer had started in his lungs and we were headed to Davenport to find out if it was anywhere else. But we both knew that it was. He kept talking about a dark spot in his vision, and there was a lot of pain that he wouldn’t admit to. But I could see it when he moved and he thought I wasn’t looking (you’ve seen him wince whenever he gets up from his chair).

This final hospital visit had been looming ahead of us. We already knew the news wasn’t good, but everything we had decided depended on certainty. Alice would’ve told us not to find out. “Ignorance is bliss,” she’d say and then laugh.

In the car, my back slick with sweat, I thought about the day she came into our lives. That day the heat was blistering, just like today, and I was at the river trying to fish and stay cool. He was there too, downstream a ways, but I couldn’t see him.

When I saw her for the first time, she walked out from under the willow tree (you know the one at the big bend) and just sort of floated into the water. Straight black hair provided cover for most of her body; her translucent skin shimmering in the morning light. I was hypnotised.

And then - just like that - she was gone. She must have been pulled under by the current – and if I hadn’t been looking at her, I wouldn’t have known she had existed. She didn’t even scream. But I did. The sound sliced through the silence and I thought that’s why he came running around the corner. He just dove in and pulled her from the water. She didn’t struggle. We three accepted the other as savior and each of us got a piece of each other to hold onto. She started talking the minute she came to, naked in Jake’s arms. And then we didn’t need to talk.

Alice and Jake and I; we never were apart after that. (You know the whole town was talking about our little family - but none of those yokels knew a thing about what we were all about). Jake loved both of us. That was ok. I loved both of them, too.

Later, after she died in that car accident, he confessed to me that he was watching her get undressed under the willow tree that day he saw her go in the river – that was why he got there so fast – not because I screamed. I had never wondered but he needed to tell me. Alice was always the way we talked to each other. She got us to admit stuff.

She died walking in the middle of the road and a car swerved to miss her, hit another car and rebounded back. She was pinned between the first car and a third one. The driver said he watched her as the life drained out of her, that Alice seemed so content, so peaceful. Like she was heading home.

For a while, (nearly a year, you remember) after she died, when we had forgotten how to talk to each other, again, we were at the river, just trying to be near her and we started to talk with her words. It was as if we were taken over by her. From then on, we went to the river when we had to discuss something big. Something important. I knew Alice would always help us.

Sometimes I wonder if he was really meant to save her that day, or if we just messed up God's plan to take her. We only had her for three years, so I guess God takes the ones he wants eventually, anyway.

Soon, God's going to take him.

After we leave the hospital, our fears confirmed; we head out to the river, right to our spot (You know that damn cancer is everywhere - not one bit of his body was spared).

It's time for one last chat with Alice.

He looks over at me from the driver's side. The worry lines have disappeared since we decided, but he is still sad. He knows he is not strong enough to do this on his own. Without Alice, we would never have stayed together and he wouldn't have me here with him now – and maybe that would have been good for me. But I'm selfish. I'm glad I'm here.

I don't want a world without him, or Alice. (I know you'll have to do without all of us, but you're stronger than me, you always have been.)

As we grasp hands, he steps on the accelerator, and we roll into the river. The windows are down and the water comes in right away.

"There she is," we say together.

Alice. Beckoning us forward.

Alice. We turn to look at each other, surprised that she is really there with us, but then not surprised at all, because she is a part of us.

Alice. The water is washing over us now and she is smiling. And so are we.