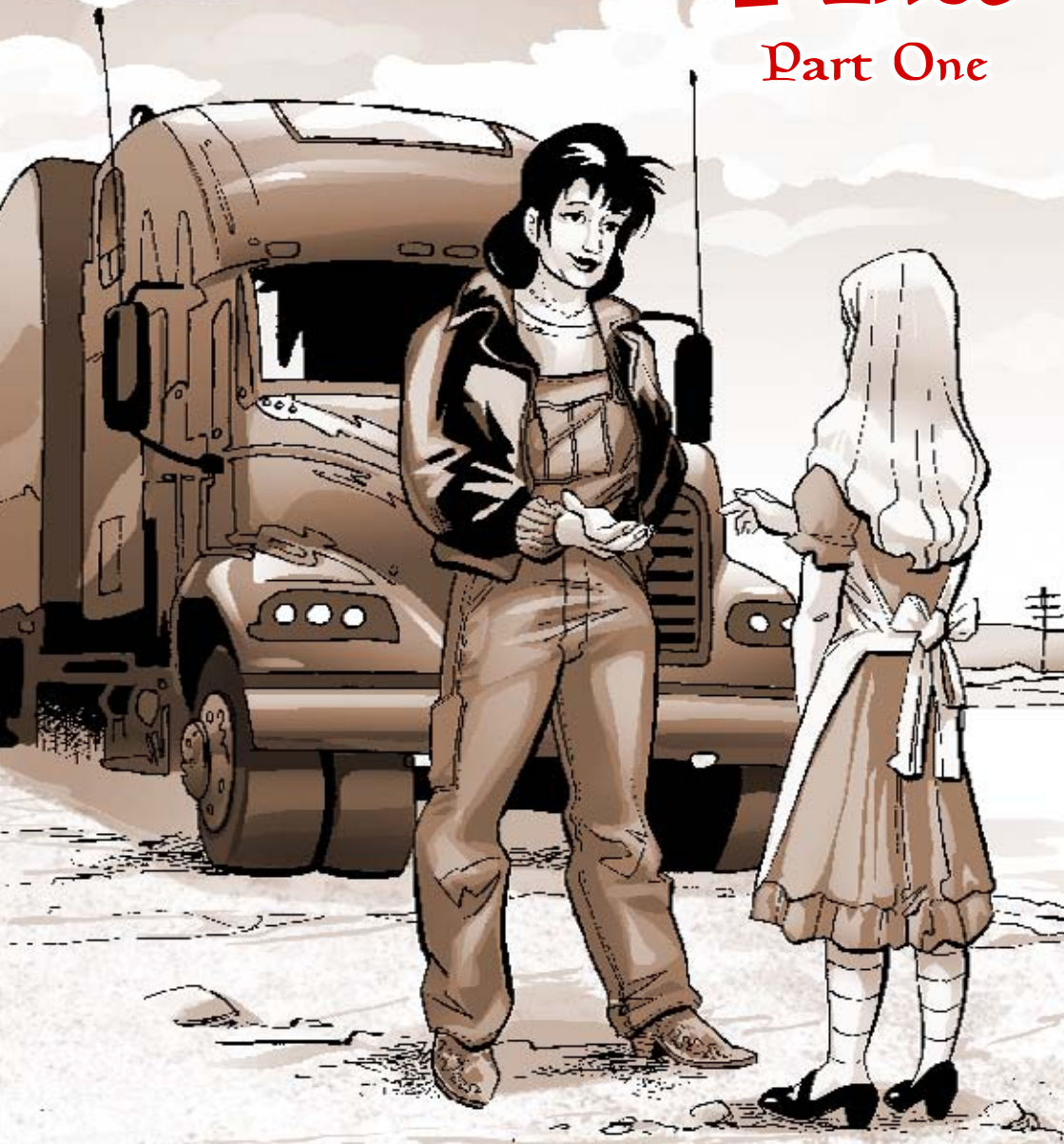


HEAVEN'S
LIBRARY

Apparently Alice

Part One



“What wert thou, dream-Alice, in thy foster-father’s eyes? How shall he picture thee? Loving, first, loving and gentle: loving as a dog (forgive the prosaic simile, but I know no earthly love so pure and perfect), and gentle as a fawn. Then courteous—courteous to all, high or low, grand or grotesque, King or Caterpillar, even as though she were herself a King’s daughter, and her clothing of wrought gold. Then trustful, ready to accept the wildest impossibilities with all that utter trust that only dreamers know; and lastly, curious—wildly curious, and with the eager enjoyment of Life that comes only in the happy hours of childhood, when all is new and fair.”

“Alice on the Stage”—article by Lewis Carroll

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ABANDONED?

Stranded!

Yes, just *stranded!*” Alice muttered to herself, standing in the scorching mid-afternoon sun and staring at the seemingly infinite deserted highway stretching before and behind her.

“Midwest,’ they told me. Never been here before, but it certainly looks familiar from something I’ve seen in a documentary. ... Anyway, I’m abandoned.”

You’re not abandoned, Alice, a voice whispered inside her.

“But what am I going to do? Like, hitchhike?”

Yes, stick out your thumb at the first vehicle that...

“But what am I going to say? How am I going to explain how I got here? No suitcase or backpack, and what’s worse, no passport or anything.”

With a sigh of resignation, Alice stared down at her Victorian attire of a blue pinafore dress, striped hose, and black patent leather shoes. “Just me and these ridiculous clothes ... *again.*”

Billowing up a trail of dust some distance behind Alice, a pickup truck was chugging toward her.

No, Alice, wait! the voice whispered. *I said the first vehicle that...*

Too preoccupied with her plight and wardrobe to notice, let alone heed, the caution, Alice had stuck out her thumb. She suddenly felt apprehensive and dropped her arm, but it was too late. The vehicle pulled up alongside her, and two young men wearing cowboy hats jeeringly offered a ride. Alice kept walking.

HL: Note that all parts of this story use British spelling.

Art by Jeremy

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents’ or teachers’ discretion.

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“So, where ya headed, Pollyanna?”

“Alas, I ... do not really know,” said Alice, rolling her eyes in frustration. *And do I have to be talking like this again?* she wondered.

“Ya don’t *know?*”

“I fear it’s ever such a peculiar story, kind sirs.”

“Kind sirs?” the driver responded with a guffaw. “Wanna see how ... er ... *kind* we can be? Hop in.”

“Exactly where are *you* going?” Alice asked.

“Wherever you want,” the passenger said with a snigger, as he climbed out of the truck and stumbled towards her.

“I do believe you are inebriated,” Alice said with a silent prayer for help and—being suddenly aware and ashamed of her murmuring—for submission to what promised to be another out-of-time experience.

“Inebri... what?” the youth slurred. He had grasped her arm.

“You are drunk, young sir,” said Alice. “I must insist that you unhand me at once.”

The youth did so at the rumble of a huge semi truck halting behind the pickup. A hefty woman wearing a leather jacket and dungarees* climbed down from the cab and ambled towards them.

“These boys givin’ you some trouble, Missy?” she asked.

“They were, ma’am,” Alice said. “However, it seems this one has now unhanding me at my request.”

“That’s good,” said the woman, sending the youth reeling backwards with a punch in the face.

“I think you both had better be a-movin’ on!” she added, dusting off her knuckles. “I think the young lady is well taken care of now.”

Wiping a bloodied nose, the youth scuttled back to the pickup, which roared off, and the woman turned to Alice. She extended her hand and introduced herself as Betty.

“Betty Trucker. Folks call me ‘Mother Trucker.’ Ain’t that jes’ so ironic? My real surname is Trucker, and that’s precisely what I end up doing!”

“Not so weird, ma’am,” said Alice. “My father has an acquaintance in the Family whose name is Joash Printer, and that’s exactly what he used to do—though I’m not sure which came first, the name or the job. ...”

“Interesting,” said the woman. “And your name?”

“Alice.”

“Hmmm. I thought so.”

“What do you mean, ma’am?”

“You seem familiar—I think from some tale I read as a kid. So where’re you headed?”

“This could possibly sound a little absurd, ma’am, but I do not know. And my speech is so very...”

“Peculiar, I’ll say,” said Betty. “But charmin’. You’s a left behind from some travellin’ theatre company?”

“No.”

***dungarees:** tough pants made from blue denim

“Well, let’s get on in that there truck,” said Betty, sauntering back to the shuddering chrome juggernaut, “and you can tell me all about it.”

With a warm smile, she opened the passenger door for Alice, who due to her attire, clambered into the passenger seat with no small difficulty. Betty laughed and swung herself up into the driver’s seat.

“Can’t imagine you stepping into anything but a hansom* carriage, Miss. And this big rig ain’t no hansom carriage. I christened her Big Bertha!”

“It is an amazing lorry,” said Alice.

“Amazing what?”

“Lorry. But it’s just *huge!*”

“That it is,” said Betty. “A Mack Pinnacle Sleeper with a seventy-inch high rise. And take a peek in there.”

Alice did so and gasped. “It’s like a caravan or something! You have closets, a bed, a stove, a television and sound system, and even a refrigerator.”

“I live in it five days a week,” said Betty. “It takes a lotta that ‘livin’ on the road’ to make a truck a home.”

“And I love the way you’ve decorated it, ma’am,” said Alice, noticing the hanging rugs. “It’s ever so delightful!”

“Mexican style. I jes’ love Mexico. Glad I’m doing this route.”

“What are you transporting, if I may ask?”

“Soybeans. For the Alimento Crushing Company. Takin’ ’em on down to Mexico.” Betty reached above the sunshield and pulled out a paper. “Tamaulipas, to be exact. Know it?”

“I am afraid not,” said Alice, and Betty revved up the engine. “Never been to Mexico. I have visited the Useless Status before, though.”

“Useless Status?”

“Oh, that was someplace in a dream or something,” she quickly responded.

“I’ll let you spend awhile in quiet, if ye want, Miss,” Betty said, noticing Alice’s discomfiture*. “I won’t be askin’ you no more questions. At least fer awhile. Just enjoy the view—what there is of it.”

“It is rather flat,” Alice remarked.

“Yup. These parts can make an anthill look like a mountain. And it’ll be about like this for the next few hours, so you might as well go ahead and git some shuteye if ye be so inclined.”

Alice smiled gratefully. She was feeling sleepy and was hoping to take a little nap, so she closed her eyes and put her head back.

“The seat reclines real nice,” said Betty. “Like a first-class airplane thing. Jes’ push the button on the side. That’s it. ... There ye go.”

***hansom**: a covered two-wheeled vehicle drawn by one horse and carrying two passengers, while the driver sits outside on a raised seat at the rear

***discomfiture**: embarrassed awkwardness

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Alice. “It’s ever so plush.”

“Hey, it’s mighty dangerous to be a-hitchikin’ like that all by yerself, if I may say so. I used to hitchhike lots when I was a teenager, and got in some tight spots, but the ‘climate,’ so to speak, wasn’t near the same then as it is today, if ye know what I mean.”

Alice nodded in a so-so fashion and stared drowsily at the road.

I’m trying to be praiseful, Natalia. I wouldn’t want it any other way, especially after my adventure with the cards, and I suppose I’ve come to expect it. But do I have to talk funny and dress weird and stuff? Maybe it’s good for my pride, but I would like it if I could at least be with Brandon on these er ... “trips.” Yes, I know I’m not really alone. I never was. And Betty Trucker seems like a sweet soul. ...

Presently, she fell asleep.

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LONELY HIGHWAY

Alice wasn’t sure how many minutes or miles later it was when she awoke, but the road and landscape looked the same. She resumed sending up silent prayers.

“A dime for your thoughts, Miss Alice,” Betty said.

“Oh, ’tis nothing. I was merely reflecting on my situation. It has not been the first time.”

“The first time for what?”

“The first time that I’ve found myself in suchlike predicaments, or ... adventures.”

“I wouldn’t consider cruising along a flat Midwestern highway as any sort of adventure,” said Betty. “But it’s my life and the sunsets are beautiful.”

“If ya don’t mind me askin’, were you abandoned? It happens a lot these days.”

“No. But I was, after a fashion, ‘dropped off’ here. That’s the last thing I remember.”

“Really? By a relative?”

“Not quite. They were people in a sort of flying vehicle that I could only say is rather odd.”

Betty’s subsequent laughter had a merry, bell-like tone, which Alice hoped to hear as often as possible on this journey to she knew not where.

“Wouldn’t surprise me in the least, Miss. Sure it wasn’t a UFO?”

“Very similar, actually,” said Alice. “At least as far as what I can gather from reading about them. Brandon—that’s my brother, I’d love you to meet him—he’s into all that, but...”

“Don’t worry,” said Betty. “I ain’t gonna pooh-pooh you. I got friends from these parts who are members of one of them UFO societies. They get together and discuss their sightings. Fascinatin’. Never seen a UFO myself, mind you, but that don’t give me no account to disbelieve those that have.”

“That’s a very good attitude, Mrs. ... er ... Miss... ?”

“I’m a miss, Missy. But you can call me Betty. Anyways, jes’ ’cos someone’s seen a crocodile in Timbuktu and I haven’t, doesn’t give me no call to say that what they tell me is a crock of ... crocodiles.”

“Exactly,” said Alice. “That’s what Grandpa said in ‘Flatlanders’ about the man who saw the giraffe and whose reaction was, ‘Thar ain’t no such thing!’”

Betty laughed again. “You have a far out gift of mim’cry, Miss. Is that how come you can do this posh British lingo thing?”

“Actually I *am* from Great Britain—Winsley Barnes, to be precise.”

“Well, that explains it.”

Alice suddenly became aware of something in the pocket of her dress. “That’s funny. I don’t remember them giving me this.”

“Interesting,” said Betty. “That’s a darn special-looking ring of keys. Beautiful. Do they sell them glowing like that these days?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Are they to your house or sump’n?”

Alice shook her head. “It’s rather hard to explain.”

“That’s okay, Missy. Young people carry all kinds of things around for jewellery. My son has a paper clip stuck through his nostril.”

Alice studied the ring of twelve small, delicately crafted gold keys. Each one had a word inscribed on its shaft.

Conviction. Eloquence. Faith. Healing. Love. Patience. Peace. Power. Protection. Truth. Understanding. Wisdom.

At that moment, one of them began glowing. It was the one inscribed with “understanding.” Alice looked over at Betty Trucker. The woman seemed tired as she stared blankly at the open highway with her well-worn yet womanly hands gripping the steering wheel. The crow’s feet around her eyes were more pronounced, but were not enhancing a smile at that moment. She caught Alice’s eye, however, and bravely mustered one up. Alice returned it.

I claim it, she thought. The key of understanding.

“Why do they call you ‘Mother Trucker,’ ma’am?”

“It’s a name coined by some members of the Lonely Highway Truckers Union. A bunch of truckers who get together at my behest on CB.”

“CB?”

“Citizen Band radio. Anyways, you know how they are. Well, maybe *you* don’t, but they is a force to be reckoned with. They wuz gettin’ drunk an’ jokin’ and that’s when they nicknamed me ‘Mother Trucker. You see, Alice, I never like to see people lonely, and let me tell you, this trucker business is about the loneliest it gets.”

“And it must be ever so difficult for a lady to drive one of these,” said Alice. “I’m sure it must exhaust you.”

“I ain’t no lady, but I maintain,” said Betty. “But you know what? It ain’t as tough as the men like to make out. You could drive it!”

“Me? I beg to differ, ma’am.”

“Oh yeah? Watch. See, this baby drives as smooth as they come. It has a wrap-around dash, makes things easier. May have to adjust the seat and steering column for a little ‘un like you, but I am willing to bet that you could have Bertha as putty in your hands.”

“Come to think of it, ma’am, that could very well be so. Grandpa drove a truck when he was but a little boy. It was a mistake really, but angels stopped the traffic.”

“Okay, then, there you go. Don’t let these macho male truckers intimidate you and make you think that they have the corner on the business.”

“I will try, ma’am. But I honestly don’t see myself engaging in such an occupation. However, I don’t mind learning.”

“Then watch me close as I drive, I’ll give you some pointers and we can take a test run.”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am. *Me—drive this?*”

“That’s right. I’d love to see the faces on some o’ them truckers to be watchin’ you a-hauling Big Bertha into a truck stop. That’ll put a pin in their macho balloons. ...

“Oh, and I jes’ *love* this song!” Betty suddenly exclaimed, turning up the radio.

*Drivin’ a lonely highway, the miles go by so slow,
Don’t know where I’m headed, but I know I gotta go.*

“That’s a Family song!” Alice exclaimed.

“Not in ma family it ain’t,” said Betty. “They’s church folks.”

*I’m jes lookin’ for the day
When I can clearly see the way.
Lord, how long will this search go on?
Life is a lonely highway, and this trucker keeps a-drivin’ on,
Been lookin’ for a reason for such a long time,
Ain’t never found but one.
Time is fallin’ to the ground
I gotta know ’fore the sun goes down.
Lord, how long will the search go on?
Lord, how long will this search go on?*

“That’s an impressive rendition,” said Alice. “Never heard it sung like that before.”

“You mean other cats have cut it?”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am?”

“Like, have you heard the song by someone else? I always thought this was the original.”

“It could be, ma’am. I’ve only heard it on an old TIV that Brandon parodies. This interpretation is more appropriate, I feel. Who is it?”

“Merle Tillson and the Wanderers,” said Betty. “They lay down the best truckin’ music in the business. Know ‘em?”

Alice shook her head.

“But it’s true, ain’t it?” Betty asked.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. What is?”

“What the song says. Life don’t seem to have no purpose. Like this load I’m a-haulin’. Fer what?”

“Well, I suppose the people in ... where was it...?”

“Tamaulipas.”

“Yes. Well they wouldn’t get their soybeans if it wasn’t for you, Miss Trucker.”

“True, but when it comes to life, so what? What the hell is it all for? They say we’s just a speck of dust in infinity.”

Alice sensed the key ring throbbing hot in her pocket to the point where she felt it could burn through her dress. She quickly pulled it out; a key marked *Wisdom* was flashing.

“That there thing your talisman or somethin’?”

“My what, ma’am?”

“Your talisman—your lucky charm?”

“Something like that. It’s very special. But to answer your question...”

Betty shook her head. “No, no, Miss. I was jes’ kinda thinkin’ aloud. I don’t expect you to have the answers to life’s hidden mysteries or nothin’.”

Betty paused and grinned. “But you know what?” she said, looking at Alice through the corner of her eye. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you have a pretty good idea!”

“I don’t know, ma’am, but I know that who we are and what we do is very important to God.”

“I suppose,” Betty said sadly. “Anyways, grab some shuteye and we can make plans at the next truck stop. Hungry?”

“A mite,” said Alice with a smile.

“There’s a Chompers ’bout eight miles up ahead.”

“What’s that?”

“Chompers is a truck stop chain. Has good food, good prices, clean restrooms, and even motel rooms for reasonable rates.”

“So this’ll be the first time I’ll make an acquaintance with an American ‘tranny,’” said Alice with a grin.

“Not in one of these places, you won’t!” Betty said, aghast. “They’ll have the s-stuffing knocked out of ’em if they are ever discovered.”

Alice looked puzzled.

“Strange,” she said.

“Well, Miss, truckers and Southern rednecks ain’t the most open-minded about that sort of thing. And how on earth did you get to hear that word?”

“Oh, in England you hear lorry drivers refer to them as such. I was sort of joking.”

“Now I want you to know I’m not a prude, Miss Alice—not by a long shot—but I don’t think it’s the best o’ form for a young missy like you to be jokin’ about that sort of thing.”

Still puzzled, Alice shook her head, apologised, and remained thoughtfully silent for the remainder of the journey to Chompers.

I claim it, she thought again. Understanding.

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PIG-OUT AT CHOMPERS

Inside Chompers, a TV hanging from each corner of the ceiling glared out sports games and a CD changer housed in a fifties' jukebox replica blared out music. The singer was croaking in deep, nasal tones.

*Diesel smoke, dangerous curves.
I'm a drivin' this truck for a mountain road.
I got a big-rig semi, and I'm a flyin' low.
My eyes're filled with diesel smoke; air fan curves ain't no joke.
Diesel smoke, dangerous curves.
I was out last night drinkin' beer with the guys,
Got an achin' head and bloodshot eyes.
I ended up with a pretty little dame.
I didn't even know her name.
Diesel smoke, dangerous curves.*

"Cute song," said Alice.

"A trucker's anthem," said Betty, guiding Alice to a table by the window. "I have a whole bunch of CDs of this sort of thing. Geared 'specially to our profession. I'm surprised you find this to your taste."

*There's a cute little waitress at the bottom of the grades.
She's got hot coffee already made.
I gotta keep my eyes upon the road,
'Cause I'm goin' down the hill with a heavy load.
Diesel smoke, dangerous curves.*

"I actually rather like this sort of music, ma'am, but I would never tell Brandon—he hates it! I've done some line dancing to similar music when we've been invited down to the local youth centre some nights."

Diesel smoke, dangerous curves.

"So," said Betty, picking up the menu, "I'm gonna sink my teeth into the Chompers' Pig-Out. Interested?"

"Alas, I have no money, ma'am."

"But you're hungry, right?"

"Very. But..."

Betty waved her hand. "No matter. This whole trip and expenses incurred are on me. Every red cent."

“As soon as I get home, ma’am, I’ll scrape up the fun funds I’ve been saving and pay it back.”

“I said it’s all on me, Alice. End of subject.”

“I do appreciate that ever so much, ma’am. So what is the Chompers’ Pig-Out?”

Betty showed Alice on the menu:

Chompers’ Pig-Out

*10 rashers**

Five-egg omelette, with choice of fillings

Chompers’ megaportion of hash browns

“It’s a brunch,” explained Betty.

Chompers’ megabucket of fries

Honey roast ham, all you can eat

Five sausages

“The best deal here,” she added. “Eight dollars.”

Chompers’ megastack of pancakes with choice of raspberry or blueberry sauce, or maple syrup topping

Toast, butter, jam, and muffins, all you can eat

One glass of orange or grapefruit juice. Or coffee, tea, or Coke, all you can drink.

“So I choose one of these?” Alice asked.

“Of course not, sugar! You get the whole list.”

“Can I take your order, ma’am?” said a waitress with pen and pad in hand wearing a Chompers uniform of a star-studded, dark blue baseball hat, a red-and-white striped pinafore dress, and white canvas deck shoes.

“I’ll take the Pig-Out,” said Betty. “Alice?”

“It seems a little large,” said Alice who had been staring open-mouthed at the suggested fare. “I would loathe wasting any.”

“We can pack it up in doggie bags if necessary,” said the waitress.

“D-does it come with vegetables?” Alice asked.

“You can have a side order of coleslaw.”

“Er ... what’s that?”

“Grated cabbage and carrots in mayonnaise, Miss.”

Alice tried in vain to disguise a grimace. “I guess I’ll just have this Chompers’ Big Bite and chips, if I may.”

“You mean you would like a bag of potato chips with the burger?”

“Er ... yes. But if possible on the side with the hamburger, and not in a bag.”

“Fries?”

***rasher:** slice of bacon

Alice shook her head. “Just the chips will do. I do apologise for appearing to be so pernickety, ma’am.”

“That’s okay, Miss. Just want to make sure you get what you want.”

“You seem a little quiet,” said Betty, after quite a while of watching Alice staring into space. “Just groovin’ on the music?”

“No, ma’am. I understand that this is your life and calling sort of thing, but I was just wondering about why a joke about a transport café would seem distasteful to you. I really didn’t mean to offend you or demean your lifestyle.”

“What are you talking about, Alice? What joke? And what is a transport café?”

“Similar to this place, actually. It’s what’s commonly referred to in British lorry driver slang as a tranny.”

Betty laughed the laugh that Alice loved. “My dear little Missy! So a ‘tranny’ in British truckers’ lingo is a truck stop. Over here it means something *totally* different.”

“What?”

“Well ... It’s a...”

Betty stopped. The waitress had brought Alice’s order, an enormous hamburger.

“Everything okay, Miss?” she asked, noticing Alice’s disappointment. “Is it not big enough? It is just a one-pounder—I assumed you were not that hungry.”

“Oh, no, the size is more than ample. But I had ordered the hamburger with chips.”

“And that’s what you have, Miss.”

“I really don’t mean to be a bother, ma’am. But these are crisps.”

“What?”

“Potato crisps. I...” Alice stopped and slapped her forehead. “Alack and alas! Stupid, stupid, *stupid* me! Of *course*. You refer to what we British call potato chips as French fries.”

“Used to,” said the waitress. “But since Operation Iraqi Freedom, we cook jes’ plain fries or Freedom fries, at least around these here parts.”

“I just didn’t see the French word, I suppose,” said Alice. “Please accept my apologies, ma’am.”

“Alice has had a rather unusual and stressful journey,” said Betty.

“I understand,” said the waitress. “I’ll exchange your American chips for British ones!”

“So ... what’s a ‘tranny’ in American?” Alice asked at length after she had said a blessing for the food and Betty was tucking into her meal.

“It’s ... someone who wears inappropriate clothing for their ... gender.”

“Oh dear,” said Alice with a giggle. “I really do need to brush up on the American language.”

“So you really dig on this kind of music?” Betty asked, seeing Alice had turned her ear to another selection on the jukebox.

Alice nodded somewhat distantly; she had encountered difficulty making a dent in the Chompers Big Bite. “Why, ma’am?”

“Cos it’s Friday, and that’s a big night for us truckers. We have a loose schedule on the weekends, some of us—not me—go to church on Sunday. So come Friday night, *everyone’s* out to party.”

Alice’s eyes flashed. “Party?”

“Uh-huh. Have any plans?”

Alice giggled. “Does it appear so, ma’am?”

“I guess not. But come Monday mornin’ we’re gonna have to get serious about who you are, where you’re from, and where you’re going. *Plans*, know what I mean?”

“I told you who I am and where I am from, ma’am, and I mean no disrespect.”

“I’m sure you don’t, Miss. I can’t imagine you being disrespectful if you tried.”

“Oh I’m ashamed to say that I certainly can, ma’am. I got a well-deserved tongue-lashing from my mummy not long ago for backtalk. Anyway, I agree that we must establish just what I am supposed to be doing here. I usually find out sooner or later!”

“Anyway, we don’t have to worry about it for a couple of days. Tonight, we party at the Waterhole.”

“What is that?”

“It’s an ol’ barn house converted into a truckers’ country dance hall, club, bar, truck stop, motel ... you name it.”

“And why is it called such?”

“See, a waterhole was a place where the cowboys could stop an’ get water for the horses an’ all. This place supplies the same for us modern cow ... *persons*. We can gas up, tank up, rest up, and shack up—the *works*.”

“Sounds splendid!” said Alice.

“So we’re on,” said Betty. “But first, I’m gonna fix you up with some basics—toiletries, toothpaste, a backpack, et cetera.”

“Why thank you, ma’am.”

“You’re welcome. Then we gotta get you into some appropriate clothes. Can’t have you waltzin’ into the Waterhole lookin’ like a left-over from *Gone with the Wind*. You’ll be a laughin’stock.”

“But, Miss Trucker, ma’am ... I don’t think I can...”

“You can and you *will*. There’s an outlet mall jes’ up ahead. Boutiques and stuff. It’s on my account. Take your pick. Jeans, T-shirts, whatever you want.”

“I am ever so obliged, ma’am, but...”

“Hey, you know what, Alice girl? I’m fine if you cool it on the high falutin’ stuff. It ain’t necessary, ’specially for tonight. You can dispense with the formalities, cut to the chase, and call me Betty.”

“I try, ma’am,” said Alice. “But it does not come out that way. Believe me, there has been many an occasion where I would have

given *anything* to speak and act in a manner befitting these modern times.”

“Why? What’s the big deal? Upbringin’ or somethin’?”

Alice shook her head. “You’ll see.”

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DUDS

Twenty minutes later, after purchasing what Betty had referred to as the basics, Alice was resignedly following her into Duds, a hip fashion outlet that was throbbing with piped sounds of gasping young females and grunting males set to pulsating drum patterns and ambient lighting. A pretty, gum-chewing girl approached Alice, who was gazing longingly at a rack of sequined bell-bottom jeans.

“Need some help?”

“She wants some jeans,” said Betty.

The girl rolled her tongue-stud across her teeth and shrugged. “Low-cut, boot, hipster, flared?”

“It doesn’t matter so dreadfully much,” Alice mumbled with a blush, already very embarrassed that she could not switch to an appropriate manner of speech for the occasion. “These will probably do splendidly, I should suppose.”

“What’s yer size?”

“A British 10,” said Alice.

“A Stateside 6,” said the girl, and tossed her a pair. “The fitting rooms are over there.”

“And take a couple of tees while you’re at it,” said Betty.

“Cotton?” the assistant asked. “Or Elastex?”

“Cotton, I assume,” said Betty with a wink.

“Colour?”

Alice shrugged and pouted in an attempt to assume a measure of relatable body language.

“Whatever,” she managed to say with relief. “Black should be perfectly c-cool.”

Alice stood in the fitting room, pulled off her dress and petticoats, and gingerly put one foot into the jeans. As she suspected, they instantly shrunk to the size of her hand. She threw them on the floor and they returned to normal.

She then attempted to pull a tee shirt over her head, but within seconds, it had draped her from head to toe, having enlarged to the size of a sheet. Almost in tears, she wriggled out from underneath it and let it fall to the floor where it returned to normal size.

“Fit okay, Miss?” the assistant asked from outside the curtain.

“Er ... n-not quite.”

“Need another size, Alice, honey?” It was Betty.

“Er ... not sure, ma’am,” said Alice, drawing the curtain aside and handing the items back to the assistant. “Maybe they are not exactly what I had in mind.”

“Hmm, maybe a size bigger on the jeans if you are planning on wearing those,” the assistant said pensively, looking at Alice standing in bloomers and garters. “We do have some cool Gs, though. That way you can wear ’em skin tight.”

Alice wrung her hands and shut her eyes on her welling frustration. “It’s not that—it’s just...”

“I’ll get you another size,” the assistant said with a wink. “I’ll be right back.”

“Miss Betty, ma’am. I assume that you must be thinking I’m dreadfully ungrateful...”

Betty shook her head. “Not at all, baby. Picky, maybe. I understand this stuff here obviously ain’t your typical mode of dress.”

“To be perfectly honest, ma’am, what I am wearing is not. I’d *love* a pair of jeans like that.”

“Then let’s get a *few* pairs!”

The assistant returned with another choice and size of low-cut, sequined, flared jeans, tossed them to Alice with a grin and left to attend to another customer.

“Step in here, ma’am,” Alice said to Betty, and drew the curtain behind them. “Watch.”

Alice put a foot into the jeans and they enlarged until they filled the room, smothering her and Betty. Betty screamed, bringing the assistant running to the fitting room.

“Oh, my gosh!” she shrieked upon drawing back the curtain.

“It’s alright, ma’am,” said Alice from under the reams of blue denim. “I just have to let go of them.”

Alice did so, and in an instant, the jeans shrank back to their normal size. She handed them back to the trembling assistant.

“Actually, they shrunk the first time I tried to get them on,” said Alice.

“S-so what about the tees?” Betty tremblingly asked.

“Same thing, ma’am. It’s happened before.”

“So, like it or not, seems you’re goin’ to the Waterhole as you are,” said Betty.

“It appears so,” said Alice.

The assistant had regained her composure, and once Betty and Alice were back among the clothes racks, politely inquired if she could be of any more help or if Alice would be interested in any other items.

“Not at the moment, ma’am,” Alice replied.

“I didn’t think so,” the assistant said.

“Why not?” Betty asked.

“Well, your young friend ... she doesn’t seem to be the type to go for all this”—she lowered her voice—“tacky off-the-rack *junk*. I *hate* it personally, but Duds require us to ’tote ’em to promote ’em’.

“By the way, your friend has a far-out accent. Where’s she from?”

“Great Britain,” Betty said proudly.

“Cool. I guess what she’s wearing is the new rage over there. Regency?”

"I don't usually..." Alice began.

"Yeah," said Betty. "Haute couture, as they say."

"I'd go for that, too, if I could afford it," said the assistant. "I'm Tracy, by the way."

"Betty. And this is Alice."

"Alice? Like in the book?"

Alice nodded, deciding it was no use to quibble.

"My youngest cousin lent me a copy," said Tracy. "I haven't read it yet. But it's her favourite book, and she imagines that you are a big friend of hers! Stupid isn't it?"

"Not really," said Alice. "All things are possible in the spirit."

"In the spirit, huh?" said Tracy. "I get it. That's why you could perform magic like that."

"What magic?"

"That thing with the jeans. It spooked me at first, but then I realised I have a friend who tinkers around with that stuff."

"Alice ain't tinkerin' around with no hocus-pocus or nothin', Miss. Are you, Alice?"

Alice shook her head. "But I do believe in *gold* magic."

"What's that?" Tracy asked.

"Magic from Heaven. And that had nothing to do with the 'incredibly expanding jeans!'" Alice added with a giggle, having decided upon a nudge in the spirit to lighten up.

Tracy laughed. "At least you brought a bit of life to this dead joint. So you believe there is a Heaven?"

"Absolutely!"

"I wish I could know there is a Heaven," said Tracy. "It'd give me something to look forward to besides all *this*." She swept her hand at the surrounding fare and cocked her ear at the relentless music. "Would you believe I have to, like, *endure* this for twelve hours a day? That's with overtime."

"Hmm," said Alice. "It is rather 'green door.'"

"It's what?"

"Oh ... sort of treadmill, I would imagine—if you don't mind me saying so."

"Talk about it," said Tracy. "Hello? A way *out*, anyone?"

"Does it pay good money?" Betty asked.

Tracy shrugged. "I get by. Food, rent on a two-bedroom apartment, and clothing, courtesy of Duds."

"There is a way out, Trace," said Alice, surprised that her speech was suddenly taking on a more relatable style.

"Hmm?"

"Jesus is cool!"

"Jesus?"

"Yah. See, if you want to rise above all this same ol' same ol', He'll help you do it."

"My folks crammed church down my throat," said Tracy. "Thanks, Alice, but no thanks."

“Jesus has nothing to do with church, Trace! In fact, Grandpa said that church people barely know anything about Jesus, and many certainly don’t act like Him.”

“Better believe it!” Betty agreed.

Tracy smiled at Alice. “I can believe that. Your Gramps hit the nail on the head. But who *is* He? Jesus, I mean.”

Alice reached out her hand to Tracy and she took it.

“It’s simple, Trace. Just close your eyes and like, repeat after me. ...”



“So what’s with this shrinkin’ and expandin’ clothes thing?” Betty asked after quite a few minutes of driving and silence but for the radio.

“It’s difficult to explain, ma’am. But I just suddenly find myself in these situations outside of my everyday life and I’m trapped in Victorian clothes, speaking posh and...”

“What *is* your everyday life?”

“I live with my parents and my brother Brandon in a community of missionary members of the Family International.”

Betty turned the radio down. “Doin’ what?”

“Oh, lots of things. Studying, distributing tracts and *Activated* magazines, and leading people to the Lord.”

“Like you did just now?”

Alice nodded.

“That was awesome, baby.”

“It’s really just God’s Spirit, ma’am.”

“Anyway, don’t sound like an everyday life to me. Hmm. You know, it might jes’ work out that we can drop in on my folks. They live on down in Hickory Falls. Come Saturday evenin’ n’ Sunday, we truckers ain’t obliged to be a-drivin’. Gives us a bit of space. How would you like that?”

“I think it would be splendid, ma’am. I’m sure they are wonderful people.”

“That they are. But since you’s a Christian, I was thinkin’ it would be nice for them to meet you. They’s exemplary church-going folks.”

“I don’t consider myself such an exemplary sample of what they would expect, then. I never go to church.”

“Neither do I, but I want them to meet you, Miss Alice. They need to see somethin’ different in a Christian. You’ll see. But tonight, we *party*.”

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THE WATERHOLE

Well, it seems the Lord Hissself musta wanted you in them there duds after all!” said Betty as she manoeuvred Big Bertha into the jam-packed Waterhole car park. “You’ll be a sure-fire pick for the competition.”

“Competition?”

Betty pointed to a well-lit banner stretching high across the grounds. "The annual Miss Apple Pie competition. I didn't know they wuz gonna be holdin' it tonight."

Having finally parked and helping Alice dismount from the truck, Betty put on her cowboy hat and dusted off her jeans.

"So how do I look?"

"Very nice, ma'am. But..."

"Spit it out, baby."

"Well, to be honest, ma'am, I wonder if you should wear something befitting such a special occasion. A dress or something. A ... er ... blouse?"

"A blouse. Good idea," said Betty and clambered back into the truck. She reappeared in gold patent high heels, a leather miniskirt, and a scarlet satin chemise with its collar turned up, unbuttoned to her cleavage and knotted above the navel, exposing her tummy.

"You look ... er ... very eye-catching, ma'am," Alice guardedly remarked with a hint of apprehension in her eyes. Although she did think that Betty looked surprisingly attractive.

"Stick close to me, hon," Betty shouted above the hubbub as she and Alice trotted into the Waterhole's crowded main hall. "Some rough 'n' ready characters 'round here. It's a chance fer most o' the boys to bring wives, girlfriends, and ... er ... company, but some are out fer..."

"Hey, Betts. You's dressed to kill, tonight."

"Thanks, Bart."

"You're welcome. And you, li'l Miss, you come to crack the competition?"

Alice shook her head at the tall, red-faced cowboy in a plaid shirt, clutching a large can of beer.

"She ain't interested," said Betty, ushering Alice ahead. "So if you'll excuse us..."

"But she's sure fire for the part. Jes' needs some boots and a hat."

"I beg your pardon sir," said Alice. "But I'm not..."

"Hold your horses. Wait right here."

The cowboy disappeared into the crowd and Alice turned questioningly to Betty.

"You're in the competition, Alice, whether you like it or not. If them boots and hat don't play no tricks on us."

"So what exactly *is* this competition, ma'am?"

"It's like who is the most representative of all that is lost, long gone and died from old Americana—the Southern gentlewoman. Has to show it in her deportment, speech, manners 'n' all. Cain't let up for a second throughout the whole evenin'."

"Sounds awfully difficult," said Alice.

"Sure is. And I'd fall mighty short. But it'd be a cinch fo' you. I was at the one last year, and it was a scream to see some of these hick chicks tryin' to put on the ritz. The one who won it was a total fake, in my opinion."

"So when does the competition start?"

"As soon as you put on these here boots and hat," said Bart, who was back at their side. "I think I grabbed your size."

To Alice's surprise, the hat and the high-heel boots fit perfectly without any unusual occurrences. She smiled, spun around, and delighted Bart with a curtsy.

"A drop-dead natural," he whispered to Betty. "She'll knock their socks off fer sure. And I'm bettin' my ... boots that this li'l bird can sing. I got a gut feelin'."

"Sing?" Alice asked, having overheard.

"Yep. I'm gonna go mention it to the musicians. And for your info'mation Betty, it's Merle Tillson's backup band, the Wanderers."

"You're kiddin'."

"Nope. They's kickin' in right now. ..."

"Now, Bart..." Betty began, but he had already disappeared into the crowd. She turned to Alice. "He's one heck of a go-getter, 'no' jes ain't in his vocabulary."

"Brandon is very much like that," said Alice. "He's a 'no impossibilities' type. I'm more hesitant, I suppose."

"Sure like to meet this brother of yours, Alice. It's like the sun shines out of him."

Alice blushed. "Well, he is ever such a nice person, ma'am. You'd just adore him. It's just such a terrible pity that he never accompanies me on these adventures."

"Why is that?"

"Not sure. But he always believes me when I tell him about them afterwards."

"Excuse me, Miss, but can I see your ID?"

Alice turned around. A brawny police officer wearing a khaki uniform and sunglasses was standing behind her with one hand on his hip and the other resting on a holstered six-gun.

"She's with me, sir," said Betty. "She lost her ID just today."

"Okay. Let me see *your* ID, ma'am."

Betty produced a card.

"Hmm. Okay, Miss Trucker, so who is this girl? A relative?"

"Niece."

"Can you verify that?"

"Uh..."

Just then, Bart showed up beaming. "It's on, Betty! Miss Alice is to sing whenever she's ready."

"Well, if it ain't Officer Holmes!" he said, his face dropping at seeing the stern policeman with his notebook out. "Is there a problem, sir?"

"Just establishin' this here young lady's age and identity."

"Miss Alice is part of the Miss Apple Pie competition, Officer, and has it on good authority to be here."

"Can you verify that, sir?"

"Most certainly can," said Bart, and yet once more disappeared into the crowd.

"So now what do we do?" Betty asked.

"We wait," said the officer and folded his arms. Suddenly, it was his face's turn to drop.

“Why ... ‘Choo-choo me’ Holmes!” squeaked a shapely woman sporting bleached teased hair, micro cut-off jean shorts and cowboy boots who had slunk her way through the crowd. “It’s been a long time, hon’!”

The officer blushed and stuffed his notebook back into his shirt pocket. “Er ... do I know you, Miss?”

“Maybe if we took these off, you’d see better,” said the woman removing his sunglasses. “Recognise me? Wanda Mae?”

“I-I don’t think we’ve...”

“Come on, hon’. No one knows better than ‘Choo-choo me’ Holmes from Chattanooga, that Wanda Mae not only *may*, but *will*.”

“Are you from Chattanooga, Officer?” Betty asked. “I happen to have relatives from up there.”

“I am, but if you folks’ll excuse me, I suddenly remember I have a situation to attend to.”

“Well, I don’t suppose you’ll be havin’ no trouble from ‘Choo-choo me’ Holmes for a while,” said Wanda Mae. “At least not this here evenin’.”

Bart had returned by now. “Wanda, let me introduce you to Alice,” he said, “the belle of the ball.”

“Alice? For real?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“As real as it gets,” said Betty.

“I *knew* it. So you’re lookin’ to win the Miss Apple Pie prize.”

Alice shook her head.

“Good fer you. It wouldn’t really be fair if you did,” said Wanda.

“Why?” Betty asked.

“Well, all these here chiquitas are puttin’ on the style and they is tryin’ hard, let me tell you, but Miss Alice here don’t need to try—she’s a natural, bein’ as she’s from that era.”

“Miss Wanda, ma’am,” said Alice. “I don’t know what or who you think I am, but I am from this very time, era, and century. It’s just that I am stuck in a sort of dimension. Oh, it’s ever so difficult to explain.”

“Don’t need to, hon’. I got the picture. Dimension, era ... whatever. But it’s like me showin’ up at a trucker’s ‘Texan Woman of the Night’ competition in China—hardly fair to the others in the competition!”

The music was now moving into high gear with the Wanderers, and Bart and Betty took to the floor to dance, leaving Wanda Mae with Alice.

“So wh-where do you live, ma’am?” Alice asked awkwardly as the woman was staring at her.

“Right here, mostly, hon’. I have a room at the motel where I sleeps most days, ’cos most nights me and the other girls are workin’ the trucks.”

“Oh, are you a mechanic? We have a girl in our Home who is ever so good at vehicle maintenance.”

Wanda laughed. Alice gave her a puzzled smile and shrugged.

“Hey!” Wanda exclaimed. “They’re playin’ the song that Chet Will the guitar player wrote for me.

“No thanks, Ramrod,” she suddenly responded to a cowboy’s hand on her hip. “I’ll sit this one out, thanks. Catch the lyrics, Alice, they’re cute.”

*Wanda Mae, Wanda Mae
I won't forget the day
You came wanderin' my way, Wanda Mae.
Wanda Mae, Wanda Mae
I just wonder, Wanda Mae
If one day you'll end your wanderin' ways,
Wanda Mae.
I'd pulled in for a bender,
When you sat upon my fender
And ooh, the sight of you plumb cooked my goose.
You loved this lonely trucker,
Who ain't much of a ... looker.*

At that point, the audience broke into giggles and guffaws. Alice reflected for a moment, and giggled too.

*And 'fore I knew it I was I in yo' noose!
Wanda Mae, Wanda Mae
I won't forget the day
You came wanderin' my way, Wanda Mae.
Wanda Mae, Wanda Mae
I just wonder, hope and pray
That one day you'll end your wanderin' ways,
Wanda Mae.
Folk's are callin' me a sucker
For fallin' for a...*

“That is a cute song,” said Alice. “He must really like you.”
“Chet? Hmm, he does. He *sure* does.”

*How I hope and pray
That you'll marry me one day,
And be Wanda Will instead of Wanda Mae,
Wanda Mae.
So will ya, Wanda?*

“Pardon me for asking though, ma'am. Do you like him?”

“Very much. You know, it's weird—it was the first time in the arms of a man that I felt...” Wanda's eyes teared up and she giggled. “This is plumb crazy. Here I am talkin' to a strange li'l gal maybe half my age—one I hardly know—and tellin' her muh heart's secrets.”

“I do beg your pardon, ma'am. We can change the subject, or you can go and dance if you wish.”

“Nope, Miss Alice. Jes' want to say it's a pleasure talkin' to ya. It's cool ... it's different. Me and the girls, all we talks about is the money we make and joke about the guys.”

To be continued...

HEAVEN'S
LIBRARY

Issue 229

Apparently Alice

Part Two



The story so far: When Alice found herself stranded on a Mid-western highway, she was picked up by Betty Trucker, a lorry driver, who's taken her under her wing. Alice has just entered a local country music club's Miss American Pie competition, and the results are about to be announced.

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BYE-BYE, PIE

And for third place in the winners of the Miss Apple Pie competition ... let's hear it fer Miss Gillian Lou Bennett."

A short, slender girl wearing the customary costume of the bygone era and a wig of long black ringlets stepped up and bowed. She answered a few questions about her schooling, ambitions, church and home life, and after accepting a red, white, and blue wreath placed over her shoulders, blushing trotted off the stage with her trophy, a gold-painted piece of pie mounted on a small black marble plinth*.

"Thank you, thank you," said the compere* as the hoots and applause died down. "And in second place, a Miss"—he looked at his paper—"Alice Godley!"

Although the crowd was noisily enthusiastic, Bart looked at Alice in dismay. "They love you, Missy, but second place? This contest has gosh darn been rigged. That jes' ain't fair."

Alice, however, was smiling. "In a way I am glad, sir. As Wanda Mae said, it would hardly be fair if I won it, not even being American. She said it was like if she won a trucker's 'Texan Woman of the Night' competition in China!"

"Go on up and get it," said Betty.

Alice did so and impressed the compere with a curtsy as she took the trophy, a slightly larger portion of gold-painted pie on a black marble plinth and the red, white, and blue wreath.

***plinth:** a flat square block

***compere:** the host of an entertainment show

HL: Note that all parts of this story use British spelling.

Art by Jeremy; shades by Sabine

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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“So, Alice,” said the compere, “you are not actually American, is that so?”

“No sir, I’m British. But it seems I have taken up temporary residence here.”

“And this is your first time Stateside?”

“Well actually, sir, I had visited the Useless Status in a... Oh, I’m *most* dreadfully sorry. ... I meant to say...”

The compere chuckled along with some members of the audience. “Useless Status, huh? Well, I guess old enmities with the British die hard!”

“The poor girl’s tired!” Betty shouted from the crowd.

“I honestly didn’t mean anything, sir.”

“No problem. It should never be said that us Homelanders can’t take a joke, especially since we’re having the last laugh.”

The compere’s following snigger left a chill in the air as it floated from the speakers and over the audience.

“Anyway, Alice,” he quickly resumed, “we are not here to discuss politics. Where did you stay during that visit here?”

“I stayed mainly in Mayhem and visited Bedlam a few times. I believe those cities are up North.”

This answer prompted a roar of laughter, which perplexed Alice a little.

“I happen to be from up North, Miss Alice,” said the compere, looking rather embarrassed. “Southerners would, of course, find that joke amusing. Anyway, being a connoisseur of antique fabrics, I notice your costume is exceptionally authentic. I do not believe they even make this Victorian silk taffeta anymore, and if so, it would cost a small fortune, am I right?”

Alice shrugged. “Alas, I would not know, sir.”

“Did you acquire it from an antique shop? Amazingly well preserved, if so.”

“It’s an odd story, sir,” said Alice. “I just landed in these clothes, and it’s ever so difficult to explain how. ...”

Alice broke off at the sound of a gunshot. The compere and the audience’s attention were drawn to a scuffle that had broken out amongst the crowd.

“Okay folks,” said the compere, “let’s calm down and enjoy our evenin’s entertainment.”

“Listen, mister,” yelled a man with a bloodied nose and a smoking gun. “This leftie, lily-livered liberal is sayin’ that we’re shootin’ ourselves in the foot. I’m teachin’ him otherwise.”

“He shot *me* in the foot!” the victim protested.

“But the poor man was right!” a woman shouted. “And so is the little girl!”

“Shaddap, babe!” said a man standing next to her.

“Don’t yew talk to me that-a-way!” she barked and slapped his face.

Suddenly the crowd erupted into an alcohol-fuelled argument over whether they—some even drunkenly referring to their country as “the Useless Status”—were destroying themselves due to certain international policies. Raised voices turned to screaming, shouting, and blows, and soon Alice was gazing down at a mass of brawling cowboy-hatted bodies. There were even a few more gunshots. Trembling, she pulled out her key chain, and for a few moments drew strength from its throbbing warmth before studying a particular glowing key.

I claim it, yes...

Alice turned and, waving her hands, managed to get the attention of the entranced Wanderers behind her.

“Wings of a Dove!” she shouted.

“What about it?”

“Do you know how to play it?”

“Course I do,” said Chet Will. “Plumb played it since I wuz knee-high to a grasshopper.”

“Let’s do it,” said Alice.

The musicians complied, and with confident precision began the opening bars of the old hymn. Alice closed her eyes ... *the key of peace, Lord. Yes, I claim it.*

Her fragile voice warbled over the booming PA system,

When troubles surround us...

And evils come,

The body grows we-e-e-ak,

And the spirit grows numb.

When these things beset us

God doesn’t forget us,

He sends us His love...

“On the wings of a dove,” the audience sang along, to Alice’s surprise. She opened her eyes to see the people, many with their arms linked to another’s, swaying as they stood amidst broken beer bottles, joining in with her on the chorus.

On the wings of a snow-white dove

He sends His pure, sweet love

A sign from above,

On the wings of a dove.

“You’s a child of God, Miss Alice,” a man shouted.

“I most certainly am, sir,” said Alice as the music kept going.

“I knows it,” the man went on. “Cos you is a *peacemaker*. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.’”

“And anyone can be that,” said Alice. “It’s as easy as receiving Jesus. The Bible, as I’m sure you all know, says that ‘as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons’”—Alice paused and giggled—“or *daughters*, of course, ‘of God; even to them that believe...”

The compere, anxious to get home, snatched the microphone from Alice.

“Glad to see you all have calmed down,” he said. “But I am sure that y’all are dyin’ of curiosity to know who the *winner* of the Miss Apple Pie competition is this year.”

“We wanna hear Miss Alice sing some more,” someone shouted.

“I am sure we can hear more from her in the course of the evening,” said the compere. “But right now...”

“*She* oughta be the winner!” shouted another.

The compere raised a quietening hand. “I am sure that you will not be disappointed at the final choice of the judges, who have had the enviable task of scouring the audience for the Miss Apple Pie candidates this year. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you ... Miss Tracy Sherman!”

Alice’s jaw dropped. “Tracy? From Duds?”

“That’s me,” said the beaming young girl that was stepping up onto the stage with her arms open to Alice. “This is just like, so *incredible!* After you came to the shop, I went home real happy and guess what? I lay down and read my cousin’s book, you know, the one about you...”

“Actually, it’s not really about...”

“Girls, I do think we need to get on with the show,” the compere said sharply.

“Anyway, it all made sense!” Tracy carried on obliviously. “Then I saw an ad for this competition tonight. I remembered how cool you dressed and it looked like fun. Then I called up my grandmother, and that’s how I got *this*...”

Tracy twirled around, splaying the fullness of her dress. “It was *her* great grandmother’s when she was sixteen! Cool, huh?”

“And also genuine Victorian silk taffeta,” said the compere, thrusting a whole, gold-painted pie on a black marble plinth into Tracy’s hands. “Ladies and gentlemen, Tracy Sherman, the winner of this year’s Miss Apple Pie competition.”

“Do you know the song?” Tracy asked over the applause.

“What song?” the compere said, looking at his watch.

“‘American Pie.’”

“Oh, the hit from the ’70s?”

“Yeah,” said Tracy. “It was way before my time, but my uncle used to sing it and he had the words stuck in an awesome red book that had a cool thing about it.”

“A red book?” said Alice. “With...?”

“You in it?” said Tracy.

“Well, it wasn’t me exactly ... but ... other things like ‘Don Quixote,’ ‘Holy Holes’ ...”

“So, do you wanna sing it, Tracy?” the compere asked.

“I know some of the verses,” she said.

“I know most of them,” said Alice.

The compere turned to the Wanderers who nodded their heads.

“We can rustle it up,” said Chet.

“So I’m signin’ off tonight, folks, and leavin’ you with the delightful Tracy Sherman and Alice Godley singin’ ‘American Pie.’ Good night. And God bless us all.”

At Tracy’s behest, Alice took the microphone and began.

A long, long time ago...

I can still remember

How that music used to make me smile.

Tracy piped in.

And I knew if I had my chance

That I could make those people dance

And, maybe, they’d be happy for awhile.

“I’ve forgotten the rest.” Tracy said.

But February made me shiver, sang Alice.

“Brrrr, I hate snow,” said Tracy, and Alice continued,

With every paper I’d deliver.

Bad news on the doorstep;

I couldn’t take one more step.

“So where’d you pick up this li’l dame?” Bart asked, sidling up to Betty with a bottle of scotch.

“Out on the NAFTA Midwestern State Highway. Jes’ standin’ there about to git hassled by a couple o’ spotty little cowpokes. I rescued her.”

“Hmmm. Wanna drink?”

Betty nodded.

“I’ll git ya a glass. Or is straight from the bottle fine?”

“Straight from the bottle,” said Betty.

The crowd was now singing the chorus along with Alice and Tracy.

*So bye-bye, Miss American Pie.
Drove my Chevy to the levee,
But the levee was dry.
And them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
Singin', "This'll be the day that I die.
"This'll be the day that I die."*

After they'd gratified three encores, the crowd would still not permit Alice to leave the stage.

"Then I would like to sing another song if I may," Alice hoarsely informed the audience. "I do believe the band here knows it, and I dedicate it to Miss Betty Trucker who is here tonight. I know the words a little differently, but it's ever such a good song, it's called 'The Search.'"

The crowd roared, Chet started a rolling arpeggio on his guitar, and Alice began singing.

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TAMING A TIGER

She dedicated this number to you, baby," Bart whispered into Betty's ear as she swayed in his arms.

"Uh-huh," she mumbled. "It'sssh beautiful. Any more whiskey?"

"Nope, Betty. Wuzn't you supposed to be drivin' tonight?"

"My folks ... but heck..."

Betty hiccoughed and slumped into Bart's arms.

"We gotta git you out to the truck," said Bart, searching Betty's skirt pockets for the truck keys. The song had finished and the crowd was clamouring for an encore, to which Alice was plaintively explaining that she was tired, and that she and Betty Trucker had to travel on. The crowd would have none of it, and it was as though a riot would have broken out until, with a tip of her cowboy hat and a curtsy, Alice quieted the crowd with a repeat of "Wings of a Dove."

"I jes' don't git it," said Wanda Mae who had arrived on the scene with Bart trying to steady and guide Betty to the exit. "The li'l girl is charmin' an' all, but I done never seen a response like this even at the Grand Ol' Cowpat."

"Maybe we should look into bookin' her, Betty," said Bart. "Wanna co-manage?"

"Not on yer life," muttered Betty with a heave that splashed its contents onto Bart's boots.

"She ain't drivin' tonight," said Wanda.

Alice was about to go into the last verse of the song, when she felt the key ring heating up in her pinafore. She disregarded it and attempted to continue, when flames leapt from her dress. Tracy screamed, drawing attention from the front of the crowd, the rest being too intoxicated to notice, and Alice snatched the key ring from her pocket. The flames stopped and her dress appeared as if nothing had happened. A few members of the audience applauded, assuming it was a magic trick. Alice signalled to Tracy to take over on the singing, and studied the key ring. All the keys were glowing.

Betty! She needs help.

With this thought, Alice—praying for invisibility—darted off the stage, ducked into the crowd, and headed for the exit. She was through it in time to see Bart, with Wanda trotting behind him, hauling Betty over to Big Bertha.

“Oh my goodness!” Alice exclaimed. “Is she all right?”

“She’s had a li’l too much,” said Wanda.

“Don’t worry, ladies and gentlemen, Alice will be right back!”

“Uh-oh,” said Bart, cocking his ear at Tracy Sherman’s announcement over the PA. “They ain’t lettin’ you go that easy, Alice.”

“She just needed to use the restroom...,” they heard Tracy say in an unsuccessful effort to pacify the crowd. “No, I *mean* it—she’ll be right back! Please calm down.”

“Let’s git y’all in the truck,” said Bart, unlocking its door and tossing the keys to Alice. He laid Betty on her bed in the sleeper and smiled apologetically. “The best thing you can do is jes’ lie low.”

“Thank you ever so much, sir,” said Alice.

“Don’t mention it, Miss. Now if y’all will excuse us, Wanda and I have some *urgent* business to attend to.”

Alice took her place in the passenger seat and was musing over the situation when the Waterhole exit doors flew open, emptying the building’s inhabitants onto the car park.

“I know the rig she’d be in,” someone shouted. “Betty Trucker’s.”

“This is like, so *unreal*, Jesus,” Alice muttered and pulled out her key ring. Two were flashing:

Faith

Protection

Her eyes fell on the steering wheel as she heard more cries from the crowd.

“It’s over here! Big Bertha.”

“And there’s Alice!”

At the pounding of fists on the side of the truck Alice, still holding the vehicle’s keys, locked the door and turned on the ignition.

Lord, please help me. Yes, this is how Betty taught me. I almost have to stand up, though.

The truck roared and shuddered to life; Alice held onto the steering wheel and stamped a cowboy boot onto the accelerator pedal. To the

onlookers' astonishment, she heaved the behemoth out of the car park, and as she was about to pull onto the highway, Alice turned her head at an urgent tapping on the passenger window.

"Tracy!"

Alice opened the passenger door by pushing a button on the dashboard, as she'd seen Betty do. Tracy, who had been hanging onto the side of the truck, clambered in clutching her trophy. "Couldn't let you leave without me," she said breathlessly.

"Alas, I haven't the foggiest idea where I'm going," said Alice. "But I know our next port of call is Betty's hometown—Hickory Falls."

"I know where that is," said Tracy. "Bout hundred 'n' eighty miles up ahead of Varminton, where I live. Straight on the highway, cain't miss it."

"I am hopeful that Miss Trucker will have revived by then," Alice said upon hearing Betty groan.

"She's heavin'," said Tracy.

"There's a pan under the sink," said Alice.

While Betty vomited, Alice prayed, kept her eyes on the road, and listened.

These are your sheep, Alice. I have sent them along your path on this mission. Thank you for leading them to Me.

But what can I give them? Alice asked. I have no Activated magazines, no tracts, nothing.

You have Me.

True, but...

Watch, wait, and see.

"Never woulda thought you'd drive a truck," said Tracy once she had returned from tending to Betty. "And mighty fine at that."

"Thank the Lord," said Alice. "And Miss Trucker—she taught me."

"Speaking of the Lord," said Tracy, "I'm so glad you found all the cards."

Alice's mouth fell open. "What on earth are you talking about, Tracy?"

"I'm sorry."

"No, Tracy, it's amazing. I just..."

"It's nothing, Alice, really. Forget it. ... Let's turn on the radio."

There's gonna be a certain party at the station

Satin and Lace,

I used to call funny face.

She's gonna cry

Until I tell her that I'll never roam,

(So Chattanooga Choo Choo)

Won't you choo choo me home.

Alice broke into a laugh. “Now I get it!”

“Get what?” Tracy asked.

“Why Wanda Mae—the truck stop mechanic—called Police Officer Holmes ‘Choo-Choo Me’ Holmes! He was from Chattanooga.”

“This is WKTR broadcastin’ for all you lonely truckers out there,” said the radio announcer. “And that’s right, Alice, Police Officer Holmes *is* from Chattanooga. And true to that ol’ sayin’ ‘speak o’ the Devil and he comes around,’ take a look in your side mirror, Miss, ’cos Mr. ‘Choo-Choo me’ will soon be choo-chooin’ right on your li’l tail! And here we go with that good ol’ trucker favourite, ‘I Got a Kitten on My Lap and a Tiger on My Tail.’ Take it away, Red Smithers!”

*I got a kitten on my lap and a tiger on my tail,
She’s smitten me with love and the tiger’s mad as hail.
I’m runnin’ like a rabbit with hounds on its trail. ...*

Sure enough, Alice heard a siren whining and saw the flashing headlight of a motorbike in the rearview mirror. Its rider was flagging her down. She pulled over onto a shoulder and rolled down the window.

“Good evening, sir,” she said with a gracious tip of her cowboy hat.

*I picked her up at a truck stop outside o’ San Antone,
She had more curves than a road map and I was all alone. ...*

The policeman dismounted and pulled off his helmet. It was Officer Holmes.

“You again,” he barked.

*I looked in that there mir’r and saw those flashin lights,
Heard that siren wailin’ an’...*

“Can you turn that thing down?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“And for your information, little girl, one ’clock in the mornin’ ain’t evenin’.”

“I’m most awfully sorry, sir. But it would have been dreadfully impolite if I had addressed you with a ‘goodnight, sir.’ Sounds a little dismissive.”

Tracy giggled.

“And *you*,” said Holmes. “Let me see your ID.”

Tracy handed him a small card from her dress pocket. Holmes perused it and passed it back to her.

“Okay, Miss Sherman. Parents know you’re out so late?”

“Nope,” said Tracy. “And they couldn’t care less.”

Holmes shrugged and grinned menacingly. “No problem, I got bigger fish to fry with your li’l friend here—underage and without license or ID—drivin’ a big rig semi. Sorry, Missy, but I’m goin’ to have to take you in.”

Alice felt the keys burning hot again in her dress pocket and afraid that her dress would catch fire, she pulled them out.

“So, is that your driving license?” Holmes said.

Alice looked at the keys and prayed silently. “Why ... er ... exactly so,” she said and handed them to him.

“Hmm. And more than that, I see. Slightly irregular, but it’s all in order, including the ID. Ya look a darn sight younger’n twenty-one, though. Why didn’t you produce this at the Waterhole, Miss Pleasance?”

“I didn’t really think about it, sir. Lord, forgive me.”

Holmes handed the keys back to Alice. “Could’ve saved us all a lot of embarrassment. But maybe that was the idea. You young’uns are always out for a prank. Now git lost and git that seat and steering column fixed to your correct height. Must say though, Missy—you handle this baby pretty good.”

“Thank you, sir,” Alice said with a wave as the policeman climbed back on his motorbike. “And God bless you.”

Holmes’ face lit up. “Why, thank you, Miss. *Thank you.*”

“That was awesome,” said Tracy. “And you’re twenty-one?”

Alice shook her head. “Thirteen.”

“Wow! And what’s your ID got to do with that key ring?”

“Key power,” said Alice. “I shall have to explain sometime. But what did you say about me and the cards?”

“The book about you. *Alice and the Cards.*”

“Oh! You read *that* one?”

“Yeah, I told you. That was the one my cousin was ravin’ about and lent to me. Remember?”

“I thought you were talking about another book,” said Alice. “But to be sure, Tracy, that one is about me.”

“It’s obvious,” said Tracy. “Clothes shrinkin’ and expandin’, the magical stuff, and all. It all made sense. She’ll be flipped when I tell her I’ve met you ... *if* I can tell her.”

“Of course. So your cousin’s in the Family?”

“Yah, I told you, she’s the daughter of my dad’s brother.”

“Oh, if you take the turnpike off here,” said Tracy pointing to the lights of a small nearby city, “you’ll pull into Varminton. My apartment is jes’ off of the main street. Then you can carry on. Or better yet, do you want to sleep over at my place?”

Betty groaned and stirred. Tracy reached for the pan.

“That’s ever so kind of you,” said Alice. “I think we ought to.”

“Okay then. The two of us can haul her on up to my place and get her cleaned up, unless you want to just leave her here to sleep it off.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” said Alice. “In that case, I would sleep in the passenger seat.”

Leaving Betty peacefully snoring in the guest room, Tracy showed Alice around her small but cosy apartment.

“I’m super like, into futons,” she said. “In fact, anything Japanese, like those dividers. Even the food ’n’ all. Hungry?”

Alice shook her head.

“Mind if I nuke a Jap noodle soup?”

“Not at all,” said Alice. “Actually my father resided in Japan for a long time—that’s where he met my mum.”

“Your mom’s Japanese?”

“No. They’re both British. They were on the field at the time.”

“Farming?”

“No. Witnessing and postering in the Family there.”

The microwave oven beeped and Tracy pulled out a steaming mug. She cracked apart a pair of wooden chopsticks and sat on the kitchen table. “You was goin’ to tell me about that key ring deal.”

“I was?”

“Yah. It’s got something to do with that gold magic you talked about, I know it.”

“Actually it is,” said Alice, her heart beating with a silent prayer for wisdom.

“Like that ring you found?” Tracy asked. “You know, in Truco’s dungeon?”

“Similar. But much more powerful.”

“More powerful? Hey, but you like, *flew* with that ring!”

“Maybe I did, but...” Alice fished the key ring from her pocket and slid it across the table to Tracy. “Look, each key is inscribed with a virtue.”

“I see. *Cool!* ‘Love,’ ‘Joy,’ ‘Peace,’ ‘Longsuffering,’ ‘Gentleness,’ ‘Goodness,’ ‘Faith,’ ‘Meekness,’ ‘Temperance.’”

“Oh ... is that what it says?” Alice inquired.

“Yah, why?”

“Well, that’s different than when...”

You already have those fruits, Alice, she heard Jesus whisper to her. *This is what Tracy needs now, the Holy Spirit.*

“Yes, Jesus.”

“What?”

“Ummm, Tracy. Would you mind ever so much if we prayed together again?”

“Not at all. Will it be as cool as last time?”

“Maybe even c-cooler,” Alice said with some difficulty, taking Tracy’s hand.

BOWLED OVER

Sorry if it's not exactly what you're used to," Tracy announced the next morning. Alice and Betty watched their host crack raw eggs into a bowl, mix in some soy sauce, and then pour the mixture atop the steamy rice that sat in bowls in front of them.

"You was sleepin' so soundly," she continued, as she poured each of them a cup of green tea. "I didn't have the heart to wake y'all up to ask what y'all wanted. Besides, I survive on sushi bar takeouts, so it's all I have on hand fer breakfast. Unless you want some packaged miso* soup."

"Not fer me," said Betty.

"I think this will do just splendidly," Alice said with a sip of tea and a brave smile.

Tracy winked. "A li'l soy sauce and it's perfect."

"It's not too bad, actually," Betty remarked, holding her head. "It's goin' down pretty good so far."

"They say it's, like, great for a hangover," said Tracy.

"Yup. And while we're sittin' right here, I wanna say I feel right bad about gettin' drunk and neglectin' my responsibility toward you, Alice. Anything coulda happened to you there at the Waterhole."

"That's okay, ma'am. I'm glad you had a good time."

"Well, I'm mighty glad we's all here in one piece...," Betty said, then she paused and looked quizzical. "How *did* we all get here, by the way?"

"Umm ... well, do you remember you gave me some lessons on driving...?" Alice began.

"Ask no questions, tell no lies," Tracy laughingly interjected. "Hey! Okay if I call my cousin? She'll be over in a flash if she knew you wuz here, Alice."

"Oh, I really don't know..."

Betty wrinkled her nose and dug her fork into the rice. "You a star or somethin', Alice?"

"Yah, Bets," said Tracy. "Wait a sec..."

Tracy dashed into her bedroom and returned with a small book.

"She's the star of this 'ere story."

"Why, that's *you*, Miss Alice," said Betty. "Been holdin' somethin' from me?"

"N-no, ma'am. I told you about my key craft occurrence, but I thought this whole playing card experience would be oh so far-fetched..."

"But it did happen to you, didn't it?" Tracy asked. "For real."

"It was a dream of some sort," said Alice. "Like what's happening to me right now."

***miso**: fermented soy bean paste

“You mean to say that all this is just a dream to you, Miss Alice?” Betty asked. “Includin’ us?”

“N-not in the slightest, ma’am. You are both tremendously real, and I love you dearly, it’s just that I am expecting at any time to be...”

“So, it’s okay if I call?” Tracy asked, impatiently waving her cell phone. Alice acquiesced with a nod.

“Cris? Yah, it’s me, Trace. Look, come over like, ASAP, okay? There’s someone here I want you to meet. ... Nope, can’t say. But you are going to flip like, majorly. Okay, see ya.

“She’ll be here in twenty max,” Tracy said. “More green tea?”

Alice and Betty shook their heads.

Fifteen minutes later, the doorbell buzzed and Tracy opened it to a short, jogger-clad, freckled-faced girl with flaming red curls.

“Crystal Claire!” Alice exclaimed.

“Alice!” said the visitor and the two girls hugged. “Forgive the sweat—was just getting my jog.”

“You know each other?” asked Tracy.

“Yah,” Crystal Claire said nonchalantly and turned to Alice. “When was it last?”

“The teen camp in Diddlesworth.”

“Right, just after the *HL Book* about you came out. You were like, the big celebrity.”

“So, you’re not going to like, jump up and down, and go into ecstasies?” Tracy asked.

“I’m happy to see her,” said Crystal Claire. “But I knew I would soon. I told you.”

“Hmmpf.”

“So what are you doing here in the ... er ...?” Alice asked.

“Useless Status? Well, it’s because of my brother Whittington—my parents came here to get him settled. He thought the streets would be paved with gold, but now he’s finding out otherwise. So what’s your mission now? Hey, just read about you and the key craft with Keana. Cool.”

“Yes, it *was* awesome,” said Alice.

“Just got a prayer request for Keana, by the way. Heavy-duty malaria.”

“Oh dear,” said Alice. “We should claim some keys for her. But my mission...”

“Look,” said Tracy. “Don’t know what you guys are chattering about, but whaddayasay we chill out for a couple of hours at the X-Stream? I’m back on at one.

“At the treadmill,” she added with a wink at Alice.

“Tracy just got saved,” said Alice. “And received the Holy Spirit last night.”

“That’s just terrific!” said Crystal Claire and hugged her cousin.

“Well, Cris. For some reason, I suddenly got what you’d been going on about. Alice explained it so cool.”

“A prophet is not without honour,” Crystal Claire said wryly. “But I’m flipped.”

“So? The X-Stream?”

“Sounds cool, Trace,” said Crystal Claire and informed Alice that it was the bowling centre.

“Has cool lighting effects and stuff,” said Tracy.

“Count me out,” said Betty. “I’m goin’ right back to bed.”

“I could certainly benefit from some get out,” said Alice. “Been mainly sitting and standing for the past couple of days.”



Leaving Betty to catch up on some sleep, Alice, Tracy, and Crystal Claire jumped into Tracy’s Smart Car and whooped, giggled, and chattered their way to the X-Stream Bowling Centre in downtown Varminton.

“I have played this but rarely,” Alice said, once the three of them were standing at their allotted lane. “And methinks my attire hardly befits such sport.”

“I’m getting the drift,” said Tracy. “You’re not dressed for the game.”

Alice shook her head and picked up one of the bowling balls.

“Could tuck your dress into those Victorian bloomers, I suppose.”

“I think not!” said Alice.

“Okay, guys,” said Crystal Claire. “We’ve got three games for ten dollars. We start?”

“Who? How?”

Tracy grinned at Alice. “Alphabetically!”

“Yeah,” said Crystal Claire. “Go ahead Alice, you’re outvoted. Give those dudes in the next aisle a show.”

Alice turned and blushed at four youths and a couple of girls who were pointing at her and sniggering.

“Watch out, Pollyanna! Don’t get that mother wrapped up in yer petticoats!”

“Might take y’along with it!” said one of the girls.

Alice clutched her key ring with one hand and slipped three fingers of the other into the holes of the weighty sphere. Muttering a prayer, she glided up to the aisle and swung her arm, sending the bowling ball sailing towards the ten awaiting pins. A crashing sound followed and the company in the next aisle ducked their heads.

Speechless, Alice turned to Tracy and Crystal Claire.

“That’s dangerous, babe!” one of the flabbergasted youths shouted. “A pin nearly hit my face!”

“I beg your pardon, gentle folk. That was not my intention.”

“You’re just meant to knock ’em all flat,” said Crystal Claire, shaking her head in astonishment. “Not send them flying every which way.”

“Actually I was wondering if something like this might happen,” Tracy muttered through a smile. “Your turn, Cris.”

Crystal Claire stepped up and scored eight.

Tracy did the same.

“Okay, Alice, it’s yours. Take it easy.”

Alice stuck her fingers into the holes of the bowling ball. She wasn’t sure whether to claim the keys or not, as she didn’t want anything extreme to happen, but she felt the key ring burning in her pocket, and claiming their power for “whatever” was the only way she could formulate her desire.

Sliding gracefully down the aisle with the expectant eyes of her team, and those in the next row, upon her, Alice swung her arm. To her dismay, she could not release her fingers from the ball and found herself flying along with it towards the ten awaiting pins. With a squeal, she sailed into them, knocking them in all directions and with the gasps of amazement from the onlookers fading in her ears, she found herself floating in an indistinguishable burst of light beyond the darkness of the aisle. After what was to Alice an indeterminable amount of time, she landed feet first on a sunlit highway and still holding the bowling ball. She pulled her cowboy hat from her back and onto her head and employed its sun-shielding properties to scan the horizon.

A truck rumbled up and she wasn’t surprised to see it was Big Bertha.

“Hop in, Miss Alice” said Betty. “And you don’t need that there bowlin’ ball.”

“I really don’t know what to say, ma’am...,” Alice said, climbing into the passenger seat (more agilely than usual, having performed the procedure many times).

“Don’t have to explain, baby.”

“I may not have to, or even be able to, ma’am, but maybe you can!”

“Well, the girls—Tracy and Crystal Claire—they comes back to the apartment, wakes me up all freaked out, and tells me that you had disappeared at the bowlin’ centre after flying through the air attached to a bowlin’ ball. They went outside lookin’ for you, searched every-place and even called the cops, but you were nowhere to be found.

“Anyways, those gals prayed with me for direction, and I jes’ felt I needed to get on with mah journey, and it would all work out. Seems my gut feelin’ was right. But I was mighty worried, mind you.”

“I’m dreadfully sorry, ma’am.”

“Not your fault, Missy.”

HOME SWEET HOME?

Here we are,” Betty said with a sardonic expression as she wrestled Big Bertha through the wide, open gates of a white picket fence and onto an expansive gravel driveway. “Home sweet home.”

A beep of her horn brought a heavysset elderly greying gentleman wearing a leather vest, suspenders, and fading utility pants bounding out of the ivy-dressed, white wooden cottage. Alice thought he resembled the typical grandfather in those family fare pioneer prairie movies that Brandon couldn’t stand. She didn’t mind them herself, found them quite sweet, and the times she viewed them were among the few occasions when she preferred Brandon was absent.

The man grasped Alice’s hand to help her down from the cab and introduced himself as Horace Trucker. Alice reciprocated with her name and a curtsy.

“Well, praise the Lord,” the man said, wide eyed.

“Amen,” said Alice.

Horace gave a start and tugged on his white walrus moustache. “Did I hear the li’l missy say amen?”

“That she did,” said Betty.

He gave Alice a firm handshake. “A believer?”

“In Jesus? Indeed, sir.”

“Well, hallelujah. Hilda, come here. This li’l lady is a believer.”

Horace lowered his voice and winked. “Working on my wayward daughter here?”

“Umm...”

“Daddy, please...,” said Betty. “I thought we could just drop in for a cordial visit...”

“And what else? If it’s what I’m thinking, we don’t have none. We spent the last of our savings on my triple bypass and your mother’s thyroid operation.”

“It’s not, Daddy. I’m self-sufficient—gettin’ by.”

Just then, Hilda, a stout, rosy-cheeked woman with sparkling eyes and a green gingham apron tied over her clothes, hurried into the entrance hall carrying the aroma of cooking. She introduced herself to Alice who performed another gracefully impressive curtsy. Hilda shook her head in astonishment.

“Horace, honey,” she softly said, gathering her poise and ushering Betty and Alice into the living room. “We’re unctoned by the apostle Paul to be given to hospitality. Here our daughter arrives on our doorstep with a delightful young guest, who looks like she could be an angel unawares, and we should be hospitable, give ’em such as we have, asking nothing in return. You know, give and it shall...”

“Be given unto you,” Alice casually added as she looked around the room. An American flag hung on the wall above a bronze bust of a fireman engraved with the words “We will never forget!” and by the window, a large, elaborately framed portrait of Jesus hung over an open pulpit Bible.

“That’s right,” said Horace with a beam. “This li’l lady knows her Scriptures. Glad you’re making acquaintance with a godly sort, Betty, even if she is a mite young, rather than yer usual...”

“I have a chicken potpie goin’,” Betty’s mother interjected. “It’ll be about twenty minutes to half an hour. So make yerselves comfy. Switch on the TV. ’Bout five minutes should be Pastor Hal’s *Hallelujah Hour*.”

Alice had to admit to herself that the atmosphere of the home was rather cosy. She was out of the habit of watching television since the renewal, but this show sounded decent enough, so she gratefully settled into the sumptuous couch and accepted Hilda Trucker’s “little somethin’ to whet the appetite” bowl of potato chips and cream dip.

“And we have Coke on tap, all you can drink,” Hilda gushed. “Right in there over the kitchen sink.”

“That’s absolutely amazing, ma’am,” said Alice. “From a spigot like water?”

“That’s right,” said Hilda. “We pay a monthly fee. Cheaper than bottled water. Ice cold, too.”

“Actually, we were the first state to get hooked up to the Cokeworks program,” said Horace. “Coca-Cola made a deal with the water companies to utilize their infrastructure.”

“Well, sir, I have heard that people drink it like water over here.”

Hilda laughed nervously and Horace turned on the television. Following a few lurid advertisements for anti-aging creams, shampoos, and life insurance, the TV screen flashed to life with contemporary gospel music and an introduction to Pastor Hal’s *Hallelujah Hour*.

“You’re familiar with him, of course, Alice?” Horace asked. “Pastor Hal Hamstrung?”

“Er ... no, sir.”

“He’s the best. Really gets a ‘Second Work of Grace’ message across. Our younger daughter, Tammy, works for him as his secretary.”

This variety of religious fare that was rarely, if ever, seen on British television fascinated Alice. There even appeared a girl of her own age singing about her love of the Saviour.

Rather sweet, Alice thought.

“That’s Patsy Anne McKinley,” said Hilda, having ducked in from the kitchen and was standing enrapt. “The new Christian singing sensation. She’s adorable, ain’t she? Only thirteen years old.”

“She is good,” Alice agreed. “Nice voice.”

“Do you sing, Miss Alice?”

“Oh, a little, sir. Usually to myself in the mirror. My brother Brandon sometimes catches me at it and kids me about pretending to be a superstar. He likes my voice, though, but I think it sounds awful, actually.”

“Well, we’re goin’ to have to judge fer ourselves after dinner,” said Horace. “Hilda plays a bit o’ pianer and I can croak out a hymn or two. Betty’s got a good singin’ voice as well, except she just goes around singin’ that heathen stuff and...”

“Dinner’s ready, but stay where you are,” said Hilda, thrusting a plate of chicken potpie, potatoes, and peas onto Alice’s lap. “We can go ahead an’ eat it TV style while we watch Pastor Hal.”

Pastor Hal had introduced his wife and was preaching about the abundant life and security in the Lord’s fold as Alice stared aghast at her plate. It must have been at least three times the size of anything she was used to eating at home.

“Don’t worry, Miss Alice,” said Hilda. “There’s plenty more. Jes’ leave a lil’ room for dessert. Banana splits.”

“It’s not that. ... I’m...”

“That’s okay. Eat up. Coke?”

“I’ll take a glass of water if I may, ma’am. Bubbly, if possible.”

Pastor Hal’s show, peppered every ten minutes with pleas for financial donations and cut-price offers on his book extolling the ‘Second Work of Grace,’ finally closed with a rousing chorus of “Amazing Grace,” and Alice, looking sated and woefully apologetic, handed her half-eaten plate of food back to Mrs. Trucker who was taking a collection for the dishwasher.

“I’m not used to ... I mean, I wasn’t that hungry, ma’am. I’m so sorry. But it was delicious. I wish that I...”

“That’s okay, sweetie, that’s okay. I’ll wrap it up in some silver foil and you can have it fer snack after church. No problem.”

“Church?”

“Yup. Still Waters Tabernacle tomorrow mornin’,” said Horace. “And you’re invited.”

“*Stale* Waters Tabernacle,” Betty whispered to Alice.

“Maybe if you go, Betty will stoop to join us.”

“I don’t mind goin’, Mom,” said Betty. “It’s just all those faces lookin’ but *not* lookin’ at me, and judgin’. You know I can’t stand that.”

Hilda gave Alice a pursed smile. “I’m sorry about my daughter. As I’m sure you’ve discovered, she can be...”

“She’s been a very good friend,” said Alice.

“Well, praise the Lord,” said Horace, rising from his chair and brushing off his dungarees. “Now we’re going to retire to the ‘parlour.’ Is that how you British aristocrats say it?”

“I do believe they used to say something like that,” Alice replied somewhat wearily. “I’m British, but I am not aristocratic.”

“No matter!” said Horace. “As long as ye ain’t *European!* Nevertheless, we can rouse our spirits with some Gospel singin’. Know a good Gospel song?”

“I know lots of songs about Jesus and to Him, but I don’t know if you’ll be familiar with most of them.”

“Try me, Missy.”

Hilda, looking expectantly at Alice, had already adjusted her piano stool to the appropriate height and her fingers were poised over the keys.

“Er ... ‘Vessel of Your Love’?” Alice asked.

Horace pulled at his moustache. “Don’t say as I know that one, but how does it go?”

Alice drew her breath and falteringly began to sing.

*When I see the world around me,
So many lost and lonely,
I can hear Your sweet voice speaking to me:
“Go and give your life each day
To set the captives free.”
But I know it’s not in me, Lord.
It has to come from You.
Show me what You want me to do.*

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” said Horace.

“Well, this is the chorus,” said Alice. “Maybe you’ll recognise it easier.”

*Help me yield to You now.
Let Your love and Your power
Make of me what You want me to be.
Help me give You my all,
Hear Your voice as You’re calling me to be
A vessel of Your love.*

“That’s kind of how it goes.”

Horace and Hilda shook their heads.

“But it’s touching,” Betty said with a smile. “Sort of ... *different* as far as those type of songs go.”

“You’ve got a sweet voice, Alice,” said Hilda.

“Beautiful,” said Betty.

“A mite weak for church,” said Horace, “but, yeah, sweet. So how’s about a Gospel song. Hit me with ya best shot.”

Alice prayed silently.

“I have one,” she said, and with Hilda fumbling on the piano for the key, she began singing:

*I'm just a poor, wayfaring stranger,
Just travelling through this world of woe.
There's no sickness, no toil nor danger
In that bright land to which I go.*

Alice finished, curtseyed, and stood trembling and blushing. Horace and Hilda clapped patronisingly. Betty was crying.

"Heaven be praised!" said Horace. "I never seen the likes of a church song get to ya like that, sweetie. What happened?"

"Don't know, Daddy," said Betty, gratefully accepting a tissue from her mother. "I guess it's just the way Alice sings these songs. Like it's really *her*, her life or somethin'. And I never heard 'Wayfarin' Stranger' like this before."

"Now I don't mean no offence, Betty, and Alice did the best she could," said Horace. "But I have a *beautiful* contemporary version of it by Loretta Mae Levine. Impresses me every time. I mean, when she swings into that falsetto at the end and the band drops out, why it's just..."

"I know, Daddy. You've played it to me over 'n' over the last time I visited, but ... never mind. ..."

"I would love to hear Betty sing," said Alice. "You said she has a good voice."

"*If* and *when* she uses it to glorify the Lord!" said Horace.

"If and when," Hilda said, ruefully.

"Please, Betty?" said Alice and smiled at Betty's "I'll do it, if only for you" answer in her eyes.

"Hand me my ol' geetar," said Betty, pointing to the corner.

Horace complied with her request. "Strings are old," he said.

"No matter," said Betty and started strumming. "This one's called 'Hands-on Love.' You probably never heard of it."

Her parents and Alice shook their heads. Once Betty had established the rhythm, she began to sing.

*Don't need no pulpit platitude
To see the light,
Nor a sermon to turn my attitude
From wrong to right.
Don't need no exhortations
From a 'say but do not do.'
I need a manifestation
Of what is true.
Hands-on understandin'.
God knows I'm dreamin' of
Hands-on understandin',
Hands-on love.*

Hands-on understandin’.
I’m beggin’ Heaven above
For hands-on understandin’,
Hands-on love.
Hands-on understandin’,
Hands-on love.

Alice clapped. “That’s ever so cool!” she said. “And it’s *really* touching. Brandon would just love it. What style is that...?”

“Soul,” said Betty.

“Did you write it?”

Betty nodded. “That’s how come no one’s heard of it! I wrote it in the trailer park over fifteen years ago. I’d jes’ found out I was pregnant with Ron, Bill had split, and I was left to rustle up the rent.”

Silence filled the room until Horace cleared his throat and Hilda offered a night snack.

“Blueberry cheesecake,” she announced with a forced smile. “Alice?”

“A small portion. Thank you, Mrs. Trucker.”

“Betty?”

“No thanks. Not hungry.”



“Half past ten,” said Alice, once Horace and Hilda had left the living room. “That’s a little early for a Saturday night.”

Betty shrugged. “That’s how it is. Church has always been more important to them. Service is at nine in the morning, but we can sleep with the comfort that we got our ya-yas out last night. Unless you want that we jes’ take the truck and...”

“Oh, no,” said Alice.

“You’re right. I’d feel plumb irresponsible takin’ you out for a night on this one-horse town! Actually I am a mite tuckered, so if it’s okay, we can turn in.”

“Turn in?”

Betty laughed the welcome laugh that Alice had not heard for the past four hours. “It’s ‘Status’ for ‘go to sleep.’”

Alice really wasn’t in the mood to go to bed just yet—it was against her usual Saturday night tradition—so she hoped at least to get Betty started on a conversation. “Miss ... Betty...?”

“Uh-huh?”

“May I ask you a rather personal question?”

“You may, sweet thing.”

“You’re not married, but are you ... er ... close to anyone?”

“Nope. Not even a boyfriend. I have Ronald, my teenage son who we talked about tonight, but I don’t see much of him anyways. Once he

was able to fend for hisself, he took off. Ain't seen him for 'bout eight months."

"That is unfortunate, ma'am."

"That's life."

"If you don't mind me asking, was Bill a nice chap? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"I don't mind talkin' about it, Alice. I jes' don't want to bore you with my tale of woe. He was about as nice as you can find around these parts. He was not a believer, though—or should I say, not a church-goer. That got my parents' goat. We had some mighty deep conversations, him and me, and we always talked a blue streak on all sorts of subjects. But ... he didn't want to git tied down, I guess. Me havin' his baby, he couldn't take it."

"It's not easy being a single mother," said Alice. "We have one in our Home, her name's Lilia and she has a seven-year-old girl. I was hoping she would get together with a young man who joined us recently, but..."

"It didn't take or somethin'?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It didn't work out between them?"

"I don't really know what was going on," Alice admitted, "and maybe there wasn't ever anything going on. But I thought it was such a pity when he handed in his thirty-days notice."

"His what?"

"Well, if you want to leave one of our Homes, it's only fair and it's according to the *Charter* that you are supposed to hand in a thirty-days notice so that they can find replacements for you—on the dish schedule and stuff."

"Sounds logical," said Betty. "Hey, let me show you your room for the night."

Alice was to sleep in Tammy's long-vacated room, which according to Betty, had—but for the addition of a couple of boxes of linens and book storage—been preserved as it was the day its former occupant left. Yellowed tickets to a Millennium gospel rap concert in August 2000 were taped to the dresser mirror along with high school friends' photos, notes, and greeting cards.

"Tammy was supposed to spend the weekend here," said Betty. "She visits home about once every couple of months, but it seems something came up, and she'll now meet up with us at church tomorrow."

No such mummification had been afforded Betty's former room, however, having long been turned into a study for Horace Trucker, and Betty, despite Alice's objections settled for rolling out a sleeping bag from her truck onto the polished parquet floor.

"But you can at least sleep in the room I'm in," said Alice. "It's got a carpet."

“That’s how Mom and Pop want it,” said Betty.

“So, what’s your sister like?”

“Tammy was, is, and always will be, the good girl,” Betty said. “Beautiful, perfect figure (unlike me), never missed church, got top grades in school, landed a job working for a major Christian TV broadcasting company, and my parents are just over the moon that she’s now working as a secretary for Pastor Hal. Mom keeps saying if it weren’t for Tammy coming along at jes’ the right time, she would have gone insane.”

“Why?”

“’Cos of me!”

“How much younger is Tammy than you, ma’am?”

“Thirteen years. She’s now twenty-three.”

Picking up Alice’s hesitation at asking the next logical question, Betty took the ball.

“I wanted God, Jesus, and the whole bit, Miss Alice, but Mom was freaked out that I also wanted boyfriends, *action* ... you know. Well ... I guess you don’t. Ain’t there yet.”

“I think I understand to an extent, ma’am. We have a teen girl in our Home who’s a bit wild like that. She knows that Jesus wants us to have fun and those things you’re talking about, so she just has to hear from Him about whether she should do some of those things. She’s an awfully fun friend, though.”

Betty laughed. “Like you, Alice. I mean, who would have ever thought we could have enjoyed a hootenanny like last night with, as you said, God’s blessing. That’s why...”

Tears welled up in Betty’s eyes and she took Alice’s hand. “I jes’ hope we can be friends for life. I’d love to meet your folks and friends over there in England.”

“I’d love that too,” said Alice.

“Think they’d like me?”

“They’d *love* you, ma’am. As Daddy would say, you’re their kind of people!”

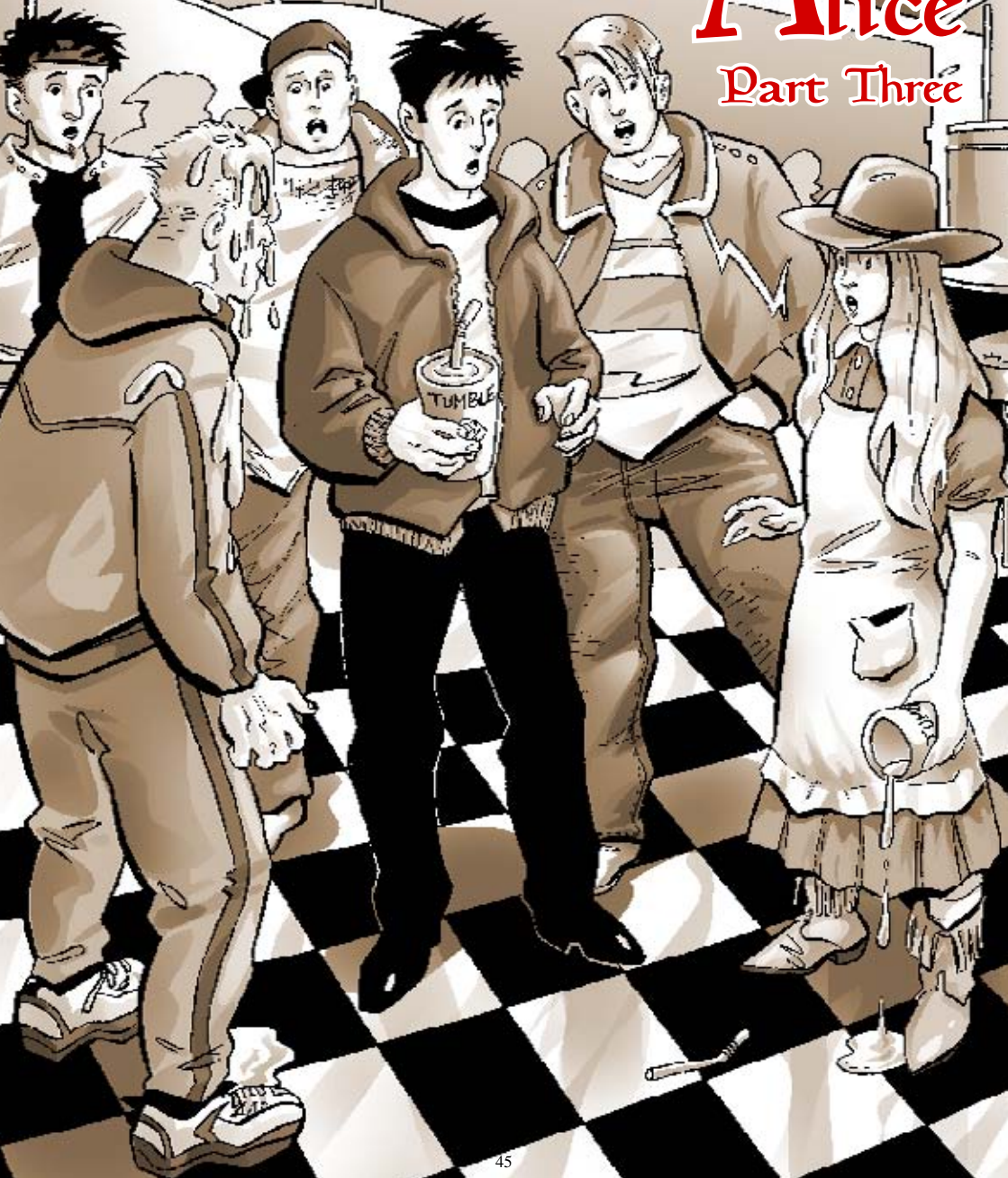
After talking together until sometime after midnight, Betty hugged Alice and left for the study. Alice climbed between the cold, crisp sheets of the queen-sized bed, switched off the lamp and fell asleep clutching her key ring.

To be continued...



Apparently Alice

Part Three



The story so far: The culture shock continues for Alice as she makes the acquaintance of Horace and Hilda Trucker, Betty's parents. After a typically large dinner and some hymn singing, Alice and Betty have been invited to attend church with the Truckers on Sunday morning.

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STALE WATERS

For Alice, the aroma of cooking waffles and pancakes drifting up from the kitchen softened the 7 AM thumps on the bedroom door the following morning.

"Bre'fast in fifteen minutes, Missy!"

"Er ... thank you, sir."

Being up that early on Sunday morning was far from Alice's idea of an enjoyable start to what was usually her free day, and she prayed that she would not be out of sorts at the breakfast table, or at least that she wouldn't manifest her feelings too obviously. Bedraggled from having slept in her clothes and not having sufficiently prepared her hair, Alice dawdled into the kitchen and slumped into Hilda's suggested place at the breakfast table to face a stack of pancakes that must have come up to her chin. She closed her bleary eyes and mumbled a prayer of thanks.

"Amen," said Hilda. "Eat up. There's plenty more where that comes from. Take your choice of toppings and syrups."

"We have the real deal here, Missy," said Horace, handing Alice a clay pot. "Maple syrup from way up in New Brunswick."

"Horace has a preacher friend who lives there and brings it down from his farm."

"It's delicious, ma'am," said Alice.

"Glad you like it. And we have bacon, eggs, toast, and hash browns."

"Where's Betty?" Horace asked at length. "Anybody wake her up?"

"I didn't," said Hilda.

"I shall, ma'am," said Alice, standing up.

HL: Note that all parts of this story use British spelling.

Art by Jeremy; shades by Sabine

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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“Leave her be!” said Horace. “Church starts in about three quarters of an hour. If Betty done misses the Rapture that’ll be her own fault.”

“I’m going to wake her up, sir,” said Alice. “Otherwise she’ll be ever so hungry. I imagine it’s dreadfully hard work driving a lorry that size all day.”

“Hmmp,” said Horace. “Suit yerself.”

It turned out that Betty decided to forfeit breakfast and savour an extra half hour of slumber before reluctantly dragging herself off to church, saying she would catch up at midmorning snack, which usually followed church and preceded lunch at one-thirty.

“I’m only going because of you,” she whispered to Alice as they sat in the back of the car. “To help you through the experience.”



The choir was singing “Amazing Grace” when Horace, Hilda, Betty, and Alice entered the Tabernacle. Horace was quick to proclaim to his entourage, which now included his brother Homer, that due to having to wait for Betty, they were five minutes late.

“Brothers and sisters,” announced the pastor, a handsome, white-suited blond man in his early thirties. “I think y’all would be pleased to meet Alice Godley, a wonderful young sister in the Lord from Great Britain, whom Brother Horace has brought to fellowship with us today.”

Alice sat aghast; the whole congregation had turned to look at her.

“And Sister Hilda says she has a mighty sweet singin’ voice.”

Alice looked over at Betty, and Horace winked.

“I couldn’t resist,” he whispered and patted Alice’s knee. “Hilda had me call Pastor Mike last night to arrange it.”

“But you never told her, Daddy,” said Betty. “That’s the least you could have done.”

“Didn’t want to scare her,” said Hilda. “Coulda had the poor child up all night worryin’.”

“You mean she may not even have come,” corrected Betty. “I certainly wouldn’t’ve.”

“But you ain’t Alice,” said Horace. “How’s about it, Miss?”

“Come on up, Miss Godley,” said the pastor, adjusting the microphone stand.

Glancing at her key ring, Alice stood up. *Eloquence, yes I claim that.*

“Pray for me, Betty,” she whispered.

“I will.”

“She asked *you* to pray for her, Betty?”

Betty nodded. “Yes, Mom. And I *will*.”

“I hear tell that you do a rather poignant version of ‘Wayfaring Stranger.’ Is that a fact?” Pastor Mike asked.

“I know the song,” said Alice.

“But first tell us a little about yourself, Sister Alice.”

“Well, I was born in England. ...”

“Er ... before we go any further, Miss Godley, and to give you time to think about the question, we’ll have Brother Gus lead the Consecrations and the brethren of the congregation in that grand ol’ hymn, ‘Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown?’ Brother Gus, over to you.”

Brother Gus, a florid*, overweight man wearing a bottle-green silk suit and a reddish toupee waved his hands enthusiastically, counted loudly, and the choir surged into an emotional rendition of a seemingly well-known hymn. Alice sat pensively listening to the words. The song did seem to stretch out a little too long in her opinion, but knowing she was “on stage,” she took care to keep a respectful countenance.

Finally, the performance was over and the pastor directed the congregation’s attention back to Alice.

“A classic song of the faith *beautifully* performed by Gus Withers and the Consecrations—a hymn with which I am sure you are familiar, Sister Alice.”

“I have never actually heard it *sung*, sir, but I do know about the song as Grandpa mentioned it on one occasion.”

“Well, for sure if your Grandfather was a Christian man, he would have been well acquainted with it.”

“Yes, he said something rather funny about it, actually. I just read it the other day. ...”

“He keeps notes?”

“Yes, sort of. They recorded a lot of what he said.”

“I see. So he found the song humorous?”

“I don’t know about that, sir, he just said something like, ‘why are they wondering if there’ll be any stars in their crown? They should know if they are winning souls or not!’ Hee. Quite funny!”

A few of the audience chuckled uncomfortably and managing a smile, the pastor cleared his throat. “So I gather you engage in canvassing, Miss Godley.”

“You mean, witnessing, getting people saved?”

“In so many words, yes, Miss.”

“Of course. I assume that we here are all saved?”

“To a degree. ...”

“Very well, sir. Then it stands to reason that if we’re not witnessing as Christians, then what’s our excuse for living? We might as well go and be with Jesus.”

***florid:** of a ruddy (reddish) complexion

Pastor Mike smiled. "You do have a point, Sister Alice."

"It's really not *my* point, sir, although I do agree with it," said Alice. "It's Grandpa's.—I just read it in an *Xn*."

"Your grandfather sounds like a fascinating fellow, a real man of God."

"He was, sir. He's deceased now."

"I'm sorry."

"Actually, he wasn't my flesh grandfather. He's been more like my spiritual grandfather, if you know what I mean. He died over thirteen years ago, before I was even born."

"Interesting," mused the pastor. "I must confess, my own grandfather, God rest his soul, was not the greatest sample of the Christian walk in my own life. Anyway, we must move on. ... Alice, do you have a song?"

"One that comes to mind that I assume you might be familiar with," said Alice, "is 'This Little Light of Mine.' Do you know it?"

Pastor Mike looked over at Brother Gus and grinned. "Do we *know* it?"

Brother Gus scratched his toupee and adopted mock puzzlement.

"*Do we!*" he said and counted off. Alice started nodding her head to the gospel beat and noticed that Betty was smiling.

"On Sunday, give me the power divine," Alice sang as they were nearing the chorus, "to let my little light..."

She paused and motioned to the musicians to keep the music subdued.

"So, are *you* lettin' it shine?" Alice asked the congregation.

"Amen, Sister," some members responded.

Alice grinned and waved a hand in the air. "We let it shine on Friday night, didn't we, Betty?"

"Amen! Out there at the Waterhole!"

"The *Waterhole*?" Horace exclaimed in disgust.

"That's right," said Alice. "And souls were saved. So, I'll ask again, are *you* lettin' it shine?"

"Amen," the congregation timidly answered.

"I mean, *really* lettin' it shine, like *big* time?"

"Amen."

"I am most awfully sorry, but I can't hear you. I will pose the question again. Are you allowing your light to shine forth as Jesus commanded us?"

"Amen! Praise the Lord!"

"Then are you ready for a little survey?"

"*Amen!*"

“You know,” Alice said softly, “Grandpa used to say that he could tell if a church congregation was truly letting its little light shine by asking how many of them had gospel tracts in their pockets right there and then. So I’m ‘a-gonna,’ as you say, ask you to raise your hands if you have gospel tracts in your pockets right now.”

The music was pulsating softly behind Alice as she, bobbing and holding the microphone, peered into the congregation. Only Brother Homer and a boy of about Alice’s age held up a handful of small leaflets.

“Splendid! Some of us are obeying the Great Commission to preach the Gospel to every creature,” Alice said, while the rest of the gathering avoided her gaze and evidently became less than enthusiastic in their participation until by the end of the song there was little if any response or applause.

“A valid call to obey Christ’s commission,” said Pastor Mike, gesticulating in an attempt to solicit more enthusiasm from the congregation. “One that we all should take a little more seriously, praise the Lord. Thank you, Sister Alice. Thank you.”

Alice stepped down from the platform and made her way down the aisle to Horace, Hilda, Homer, and Betty who had been joined by a pretty young blonde woman.

“Alice,” said Hilda, “let me introduce Betty’s younger sister, Tammy. She would have come over last night, but she could only make it to the end of this church service. Pastor Hal, her boss, had to make late-night preparations for his early morning Gospel TV program and required her assistance.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Alice with a curtsey. “Betty told me all about you.”

Tammy’s face dropped, but she granted Alice a curt handshake.

“And Hilda and I couldn’t resist telling Tammy all about *you*, Miss Alice,” Horace said quickly. “And the positive effect you have been having on Betty.”

“Very impressive,” said Tammy. “Getting my sister to darken a church door is a miracle in itself. What denomination do you belong to, by the way?”

“A nondenominational group of missionaries called the Family International.”

Tammy wrinkled her pert little nose and patted her hair. “Can’t say as I’ve heard of it. Do you have places of worship?”

“Not really—if you mean churches. We worship every day in our homes, like in devotions, and we have praise time...”

“Er ... we’ll have plenty of time to talk over midmorning snack and lunch,” said Hilda, noticing that their conversation was distracting the pastor who was about to give an altar call. “Are you going up, Betty?”

Betty shook her head.

“I am,” said Tammy. “I have fallen a few times this week, and need to reaffirm my salvation. Coming Alice?”

“You mean you’re going to get saved again?”

Tammy nodded. “Of course, why?”

“Well, ma’am, I don’t need to.”

Horace, Hilda, and Tammy looked at Alice in shock.

“Are you one of those eternal security people?” Horace asked.

“I don’t know what you mean about that, sir,” said Alice.

“Then have you experienced the Second Work of Grace?” Tammy asked. “Entire sanctification?”

“I don’t know about that either. All I know is that once you’ve asked Jesus in your heart, you don’t have to ask Him in again. He promised to never leave us or forsake us.”

“Really?” said Betty.

“Yes. Now if this was to be a prayer for your NWOs, for instance, then I can see going up for prayer. But as far as prayer for getting saved again, I just don’t see the...”

“Don’t listen to her, Betty,” said Tammy. “That’s a false doctrine. She may have gotten you into church, and that’s about as far as you should go with her. Let’s clear the rest of it up with the pastor.”

With that, Tammy reverently followed Mr. and Mrs. Trucker to the altar, where they knelt and joined in with other members of the congregation in “amening” Pastor Mike’s salvation prayer.

“Have you ever asked Jesus in your heart, ma’am?” Alice whispered to Betty.

“Yes, I did. At Daddy’s behest when I was around eight years old. It made me and him happy. Then when I was gettin’ onto twelve and thirteen, hormones kicked in and you know ... anyways, I done told you all this before. But I am kinda comforted about what you said about Jesus never leavin’ us. That’s what I believe, really. He either did it all or He didn’t, without a li’l help from us thrown in.”

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ABOUT HER FATHER’S BUSINESS

Okay, Miss Alice, see you back at the house for midmorning snack,” Hilda Trucker yelled from the church entrance, the service being over and most of the congregation having left. Alice had been curiously browsing the church literature stand, puzzled at some of its content.

“It’s homemade cherry pie and strawberry milkshakes. Betty’s agreed to help me set things up, and Uncle Homer’ll take ya home in a few minutes.”

“Then we have a barbecue grill for lunch,” said Horace. “Wouldn’t wanna miss that, Alice—enough meat and potato salad to feed an army!”

“Thank you ever so much, sir. I shall look forward to it.”

“Alice, can we talk with you for a second?”

Alice turned; it was Pastor Mike and Gus Withers accompanied by an older female member of the Consecrations, and a couple of young, clean-cut, well-dressed gentlemen. The group introduced themselves.

“Veronica Stamper. Pleased to meet you.”

“Brad. Praise the Lord.”

“Craig. My pleasure.”

Alice curtsied, soliciting patronising smiles from the circle.

“We form the governing body of Still Waters Tabernacle, Miss Alice—what you could term the ‘elders,’” said Pastor Mike, and chuckled.

“However, that would be an inappropriate title for Brothers Craig and Brad—and dear Sister Veronica, of course,” he hastily added.

“We would like to discuss a few things with you, Miss Alice,” said Veronica. “If that’s okay.”

“That would be splendid. I need only wait upon Uncle Homer. He’s picking me up for midmorning snack and lunch with the Trucker family.”

“We can make it short,” said Pastor Mike extending his hand towards the back of the church. “Shall we sit down over there by the piano?”

“By all means,” said Alice, hoping and praying that Uncle Homer would be present shortly. She quickly pulled out her key ring, and discreetly studied it nestled in the palm of her hand. This time, two keys were flashing—the ones inscribed with “Wisdom” and “Eloquence.”

I claim these keys, Jesus.

“Well,” said Veronica, pulling her chair up in front of Alice. “I suppose we should get straight to the point. Are you born again?”

“I have asked Jesus into my heart.”

“When?”

“Don’t know exactly, but my parents said I got saved at around three years old.”

“Three years old?” Pastor Mike exclaimed. “You were just a child! Do you remember the occasion?”

Alice shook her head. Brad and Craig did the same and smirked.

“Have you been baptised?” Gus asked. “Born of water?”

Alice shook her head again.

Veronica frowned and shook hers. “We of the Brethren of the Second Work of Grace strongly believe that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven one

must be born again of the Spirit *and* of water, as Christ commanded. Have you received the baptism of the Holy Spirit?”

“I have prayed for the Holy Spirit, ma’am, and She helps me very much when I witness, reminds me of verses and gives me things to say to people. ...”

“Did you say ‘She?’”

Alice nodded.

“Are you insinuating that Christ’s Holy Spirit, the Comforter is a *woman?*” Gus asked.

“Why not?” Alice said with a shrug.

“God forbid!” said Pastor Mike.

Veronica turned and glared at him. “And what would be so bad about that if it were true, Brother?”

Pastor Mike shrugged and squirmed. “Er ... nothing, Sister.”

“You feel that the Holy Spirit would not do such a great job if He were a woman?”

“Nothing of the sort, Sister Veronica. I apologise.”

“So what makes you think that the Holy Spirit *is* a woman, Miss Alice?” Brad asked.

“It seems to be according to the Word. You could do a Bible study on it if you wish.”

“That wouldn’t be necessary, Miss Alice,” said Craig. “We here are very boned up on our Bible knowledge.”

“Five years in Bible seminary,” Brad smugly added.

Pastor Mike cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, but we are not here to argue theological doctrines—only to have a simple discussion about the state of the young lady’s soul.”

“I agree entirely, sir,” said Alice. “My daddy tells me over and over when we go out witnessing to not get into theological hair-splitting arguments, especially with ... er ... members of churches. The most important thing is making sure that we are a sample of Jesus’ love, and that lost people know that God loves them and that they can be saved. It’s simple really.”

“Not as simplistic as all that, Miss,” said Veronica.

“Sister Alice said ‘simple,’ not ‘simplistic,’” Pastor Mike interjected.

“Same thing in *my* book,” said Veronica with a snort. “I see, Miss Alice, that you have a certain zeal toward God, as the Good Book calls it, but there’s a great deal more to working out our own salvation and entering the Kingdom than you naively assume.”

By now, Alice was silently claiming every spirit helper she could think of aboard the key craft to help her field this battery of questions.

Lord, I don’t mean to murmur, but why have You allowed me to be thrown into this, when I can’t even remember the details of the 70 weeks

of Daniel? Brandon really should be here, he does great teaching the 12 Foundation Stones classes. And he really knows the Endtime.

“That may be so, ma’am,” Alice finally responded. “But just the other week, I prayed with our neighbour lady’s five-year-old daughter to receive Jesus, and she changed. She had had trouble sleeping at night. Bad dreams and things ... you know, visions of creepy spirits. But now she sleeps soundly and is happy.”

“The child saw spirits?”

Alice nodded. “But then I prayed and rebuked the Devil and any demons that were bothering her. We were out in the garden, so I couldn’t do it really loud, but it worked.”

“So you believe in spirits?”

“Of course I do, ma’am. Good *and* bad.”

“Do you come from a spiritualist church?” Craig asked.

“I am not sure of what exactly that is.”

“It’s a church—for want of a better word—whose members communicate with spirits.”

Alice shrugged. “I see. Well I do communicate with spirits—good ones, of course. The bad ones I *fight!*”

“I knew it,” muttered Veronica. “That’s how come the light that we see in her is darkness.”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am?”

“I knew from the first time I laid eyes on you that you were entertaining what the Scripture calls familiar spirits. That accounts for your dress, your speech, and the way you could just walk in here and hold everybody spellbound, including poor unsuspecting Hilda and Horace Trucker. But not me, Missy. I am wise to your shenanigans.”

Alice closed her eyes and silently prayed.

“She’s probably conjuring those spirits up right this second, see?” Veronica whispered.

“Sister, Sister,” said Pastor Mike, “let’s give the poor girl some benefit of the doubt. My spirit instantly bore witness that she is a child of God. What you are insinuating is that even *I* was deceived.”

“It does say even the very elect, Brother Mike. *Even the very elect.*”

“Tell me. What do these ‘spirits’ tell you to do, Miss Alice?” Brad asked.

“Oh, simple things really,” said Alice. “Like who to give a tract to on the bus and which one to give. When and how to go and apologise to someone in the Home or not—well, most often that’s Jesus who tells me to do *that!* Usually it’s nothing super big, but the consequences could have been if I didn’t obey. Like one time, my spirit helper told me to go and check the kitchen after I’d made a snack. It was ever so difficult, as I was almost asleep in bed for the night, nev-

ertheless I went downstairs and saw that I'd left the gas on! Thank the Lord I'd obeyed."

"So what is your 'spirit' telling you now, Alice?" Gus demanded.

"He—and I think it's the Lord—is saying that I should stay calm and pray for dear Sister Veronica here because of what ... er ... Jack did to hurt her heart so badly."

"What?" Veronica shrieked. "Now we *know* for sure that you have a wicked divining spirit!"

Veronica gasped and slumped back in her chair, trembling. Tears came to her eyes. "Lord Jesus, this is all too much," she muttered.

"A-Alice," said Pastor Mike, taking her hand, "I am in no way fit to judge, Sister, but I see you as a girl—a little misguided, perhaps—with a precious mission. One that I hope I can partake of, if only in my prayers."

"Thank you, kind sir," said Alice. "Your prayers will mean a lot to me, knowing that..."

"Alice! What are you doing still here?"

Alice turned in her chair. Horace Trucker was storming down the aisle of the church waving his hands. "You were supposed to come back with Uncle Homer. We assumed you were with him, and when we arrived home we found out that he had assumed you were ridin' with us!"

"I am so dreadfully sorry, sir," said Alice. "But I got involved in a most *fascinating* conversation."

"Sure did," said Pastor Mike. "This little lady is a treasure chest of wisdom. You should be mighty proud."

"I am, and I believe Betty is tickled pink to have made such a friend. Anyways, Alice, you missed the midmorning snack of cherry pie and strawberry milkshakes, but Hilda saved you a li'l piece, and lunch is awaitin' ya. Homer took over on the barbecue."

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TAMMY'S TIRADE

Uncle Homer's cheery wave and the smell of barbecued beef wafting from the Truckers' front lawn greeted Alice as she stepped out of the car. Betty flashed her a "I missed ya" smile as she unfolded deck chairs, and Hilda remarked upon the gorgeous weather as she set out plastic cups, cutlery, and Styrofoam plates on the collapsible tables.

"Should be ready in about fifteen minutes," Homer announced. "Y'all better be hungry."

Alice did find the aroma of the barbecue rather appetising.

“Tammy ain’t around?” Horace asked.

“She’s inside,” said Hilda.

“Some online biz,” said Betty.

“Meanwhile, y’all can help yourselves to some chips and dip, potato salad, and Coke on tap,” said Hilda.

They did so, and Mr. and Mrs. Trucker made small talk about the latest climate changes, epidemics, and foods to avoid, until Homer announced that the meat was ready for those who preferred it medium rare.

Tammy however had still not shown up.

“Do you want to tell her that lunch is ready, honey?” said Hilda.

Glumly leaving his plate, Horace trudged over to the house. A few minutes later, he returned with Tammy sternly in tow.

“She has some slight issues,” he muttered.

“Far from slight, Daddy.”

“Explain, sweetheart,” said Hilda.

“I’ve been doing some online checking on Betty’s ‘sweet’ little friend here, and *this* is what showed up.”

Tammy thrust a wad of printed sheets of paper into Hilda’s lap, not realising that it contained a plate of potato salad.

“You could have at least printed on both sides, dear,” said Hilda, wiping mayonnaise from the pages. “A *terrible* waste. Hmm ... ‘Closure.com’—is that your church, Alice dear?”

“That’s just the website, Mom. Read on.”

Somewhat mystified, Hilda did so. “So what has this got to do with you, Alice?”

Alice fumbled in the pocket of her dress and pulled out the key ring. A key was flashing with the word “Conviction.”

I claim it in Your Name, Jesus.

“Now look at her,” said Tammy. “Fidgeting with that key ring.”

“Probably a nervous habit,” said Uncle Homer. “We all have ’em. Now the meat is gettin’ cold—shall we jes’ go ahead and enjoy the barbecue?”

“I think we should put this *feasting of the flesh* on hold until we get to the bottom of this, Uncle Homer,” said Tammy.

“I *still* don’t understand what all this has to do with you, Alice?” Hilda asked again.

“Nothing, ma’am. It’s an online site dedicated to harm me, my family and friends, and our beliefs and lifestyle.”

“What do you mean, you have nothing to do with it?” said Tammy. “The whole thing is exposing your supposed religion. Take the time to read it, Mom, instead of just skimming it with that stupid baffled expression.”

“Now mind yer tongue with yer mother, Tammy,” said Homer.

“I *am* baffled,” said Hilda. “All this doesn’t seem to have much to do with who I see sitting before me.”

“Appearances can be deceiving, Mom.”

“So what does *this* mean, Alice?” Hilda asked. “The movies we used to watch were closely monitored, supervised, and restricted by our parents and “shepherds.””

“It means that we can’t just sit down in front of the TV and watch anything that comes on,” said Alice. “It’s not always easy, but I agree with that, actually. I recently visited a friend whom we had won to the Lord, and she just plonked herself down in front of the telly. I couldn’t believe the banal stuff she was watching. All that silliness and violence.”

“So apparently, Alice, you can’t make your own decisions about what you watch,” said Tammy.

“You couldn’t either, sweetheart,” said Horace. “We granted you kids a wide berth on viewing violence, but Hilda and I always made sure you were kept away from any scenes remotely connected to ... er ... intimacy.”

“Yes, honey,” said Hilda. “But it says here that Family Missions regards ... er ... intimacy as natural and godly.”

“Natural and godly?” Tammy asked. “It’s disgusting!”

“You’re right,” said Horace. “It was introduced into the world with Satan’s first temptation of Eve.”

“Really, Horace?” Hilda said somewhat dolefully.

“Not so, Mom,” said Betty. “I believe the Bible tells us that God’s first commandment to Adam and Eve was ‘be fruitful and multiply.’”

“Where does it say that?” said Horace.

“In Genesis one,” said Betty. “Seems I know the Bible better’n you.”

“And what’s this ‘hearing from beyond’ thing?” Hilda asked, having skimmed a little more of the printout.

“My question exactly, Mom,” said Tammy. “It’s obvious they are communicating with familiar spirits.”

Hilda shook her head. “That is strictly forbidden in the doctrine and the... What does it say, Horace, dear? Help me out here.”

“According to the shibboleths of the Church of the Second Work of Grace,” Horace quoted, “any member found indulging in divination or practises such as lead to communication with departed spirits as forbidden in the Law of Moses shall be hereby excommunicated.”

“So then,” said Tammy, “what more evidence do we need?”

“*Evidence?*” said Betty. “You were looking for evidence? For what?”

“To *expose* her!” Tammy shrieked, pointing at Alice.

“It seems mighty important to ya to do so,” said Homer.

“And so it is! When I see the sneaky deceiving effect this evil little witch has had on almost everyone she comes across except me, I want to do all I can to expose it.”

“Tammy, you have no right to speak to or treat a young sister in the Lord this way,” said Betty.

“Depends if she is truly a sister in the Lord.”

“I believe she is,” said Betty.

“Now look who’s talking. A truck-driving slut!”

“Wait a second, Tammy!” said Hilda, standing up. “You have a right to your opinions, but as a Second Work of Grace Christian, you should know better than to speak to your sister in such a way. This is so out of character for you.”

By this time, Betty was on her feet also and with calm deliberation, began addressing Tammy. “Just a couple o’ days ago in a boutique I saw Alice ‘in action’ so to speak. She had that poor teenage girl who was as soured on religion and church as I was—and still am—weepin’ an’ beggin’ Christ to fill her soul. What can you say to that?”

“I say ‘amen,’” said Homer, who had given up on trying to get the others to eat and was putting the meat back on the grill. “By their fruits ye shall know them.”

“No one asked *you!*” snapped Tammy.

“*Tammy!*” Hilda exclaimed. “What’s got into you? I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Okay, Mom, okay. Maybe it’s not altogether Alice’s fault and we need to rescue her. Maybe she’s basically a good Christian girl, but she’s been led astray by her parents and the leaders of her cult.”

“My parents and the Home’s Steering Council are sweet, wonderful people, Tammy,” said Alice, who had been quietly and bemusedly watching the argument while munching on a spare rib that Homer had discreetly offered her. “And they are surely not leading me astray. In fact, they are the ones who taught me to witness like that. Furthermore, I don’t need to be rescued.”

“Amen,” croaked Homer from his post at the barbecue pit. “It’d be a case of the blind leadin’ the seein’!”

“Shaddap, you stupid ol’ coot!” Tammy screamed.

Silence followed, leaving Homer stunned, Hilda in tears, Horace sitting speechless, and Betty and Alice staring at the sky.

“Very well, Mom and Dad,” Tammy said, lowering her voice and pointing to Alice and Betty. “It’s me or them. Disown them *now*, or before long, the whole town is going to know that you’ve been associating with a weird little brainwashed dupe, and your name will be something a lot stinkier than mud. I shall see to it that ... er ... Pastor Hal exposes Alice and her cult on his next *Hallelujah Hour*.”

Betty rose to her feet and turned to Alice. "I have a strong feelin' this is our cue to leave."

"What a pity," whispered Alice. "I was finally starting to feel hungry."

"You're leaving?" said Hilda.

"That we are," said Betty.

"Why?"

"Tammy don't leave us much option, Mom."

"I suppose you're right, but won't you at least stay for lunch and mid-afternoon snack? Ice cream sundaes with chocolate almond sauce, and pecan pie."

Betty shook her head.

"Are you sure? We have a pot roast and sweet potatoes goin' fer dinner," said Horace.

"And apple pie with cheese crust for dessert," said Hilda. "Not to mention a surprise late-night snack. Got a lot of these desserts on a special at Gutstuffers, by the way."

"I said *now*, you guys!" Tammy screamed. "I will not put up with them enjoying our hospitality a second longer!"

Betty and Alice headed for the truck.

"Thank you ever so much for your hospitality, Mr. and Mrs. Trucker," Alice called back. "And you too, Mr. Homer. I'll be praying for you."

"I know you will, Miss Alice," said Hilda Trucker, shaking her head and staring disdainfully at her livid younger daughter. "I know you will."

"As I said, home sweet home," Betty muttered as they pulled out of her parents' driveway. "Don't it make ya feel all warmy and fuzzy?"

"I'm so sorry for you, ma'am."

"Oh, don't be, Miss. Tell ya what, I wanna surprise ya with my own 'home sweet home' about two hundred miles from here."

"I thought you just lived in this lorry," said Alice.

"I do most nights, but I actually live in a trailer park. That's a whole 'nother community in itself. We can stay over there tonight. You are welcome to sleep in the truck or my 'home.'"

"That's ever so kind of you, ma'am."

"My pleasure. Anyways, it seems I'm introducin' you to all kinds of communities. First the truckers, then my folks and the church community, and now a UFO society."

"Really?"

"Yup. Sighters United, about a hundred and fifty miles west of here on the way to my place. Gonna give 'em a call."

EXTRA-DIMENSIONAL ABDUCTION

The moon, waxen full in the dark blue starlit sky, was lighting up the prairie's white sand and shrubs and silhouetting the cacti. Alice had never seen anything like this unearthly beauty except in a recent issue of *National Geographic*.

"And they live out here?" she asked.

"They sure do. They have quite a spread. Will Morse, the head of the society, inherited the whole thing from his daddy, but he had no interest nor hand for horse ranchin', so it's jes' land, land, and more land.

"See up on that there roof?" she said as they drew closer to a sprawling white adobe ranch house. "That's a telescope. Don't know as I have ever heard of anyone else privately owning one like that."

"It's huge," said Alice.

"Yup. He should donate it to NASA."

The semi rumbling onto the property disturbing the silence that was dead but for the chirping of crickets brought inquisitive silhouettes to the low-lit windows. The front door opened and a voice familiar to Betty called out.

"It's been a long time, Bets, me gal!"

"It's Will Morse hisself," Betty whispered, opening the truck door. She reached out a hand, and a lanky, greying man in a white shirt and dark slacks helped her to step down. They embraced and Betty drew his attention to Alice in the passenger seat.

"Pardon me, young Miss, allow me the honour," he said and courteously aided Alice to the ground in the same fashion. An elegant curtsy rewarded his action.

"Man, oh man. Now I've died and gone to Heaven, or at least back a coupla centuries. That is a charming gesture, Miss. Is that back in vogue or somethin'?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir. It's just that when I find myself in these clothes, I am constrained to do so as if by the pressure of a past mode itself!"

Will shook his head and looked at Betty with a bewildered smile. "If this is how it seems, I am honoured, intrigued ... what more can I say? Y'all came for the meeting?"

Betty nodded.

"And your delightful companion also?"

"Actually more for her sake than mine, this time. Alice has an extra-terrestrial story."

"Is that so? I'm interested. Shall we go inside?"

Will Morse directed Betty and Alice into the large parlour living room area where a group of about two dozen men and women between the ages of twenty and sixty sat on red velvet couches. They stood up to greet the new arrivals and to introduce themselves.

“Shane.”

“Sandy.”

“Kimberley. Pleased to meet you.”

“Rick, hi.”

“I’m Jack. It’s a pleasure.”

“Jeanie, same here.”

“Name’s Howie. Glad to make your acquaintance.”

“I’m Darla. Welcome to Sighters United.”

“Friends,” said Will after Alice had made the rounds of introductions and had perched on a couch, alarmed to find herself in such a position that all eyes were upon her, “apparently Alice has a story,”

“A sighting?” a member of the gathering asked.

“I don’t know, Kim. She hasn’t told me. But our friend, Betty Trucker, thought it noteworthy enough to bring her all the way here to discuss it. Alice, over to you.”

“Y-you wish for me to talk about it *now*, sir?”

Will nodded.

“But surely there must be others here who would appreciate telling their...”

“The meeting had been goin’ for awhile before you and Miss Trucker arrived. We’d just finished with Sandy’s account of her ‘abduction.’”

“Abduction?”

“Martians. They captured her and took her into the spaceship where they... Actually, maybe it’s better not for young ears.”

“Maybe so,” said Alice with a grin. “Then I venture to suggest that my account would but prove mundane after such a steamy episode!”

The ensuing laughter considerably lightened the air and Alice settled back, confident that her story would not be required.

“But did you experience a sighting, Miss Alice?”

“More than that, Rick,” said Betty. “And more than an abduction.”

“Sorry, Alice,” she whispered, “but they do need to hear your story.”

Like nature abhorring a vacuum, or as she had learned, God loving to fill one, Alice could neither disappoint those earnestly inquisitive faces nor resist satisfying the expectant silence.

“I do not know if I would describe my experience as a ‘sighting,’” she said. “In truth, I was aboard something similar to what is described as a UFO, in that it was circular, like a giant golden Dippy

Donut! But it's called a key craft because around the rim on the outside hang thousands of these golden keys and it had a flashing dome in the middle. This was the second time I was transported by one."

"How did you enter it?"

"On this occasion, strangely enough, I honestly for the life of me do not remember. I just know I was on it and they dropped me off here on a Midwestern highway.

"The first time I entered it, however, was from my parents' car on a motorway to London. It was hovering over us as I was dosing off. I even saw it through the car roof."

"Did anyone else in the car see it?"

"No. Anyway, while my body remained in the car I was pulled up by these two ... er ... *beings*, like angels."

"Sounds like an abduction to me!" said a gentleman with a guffaw. Ripples of laughter followed.

Alice laughed too. "Anyway, Tola and Tor are their names."

"Beings, you say? Aliens?"

"Maybe, ma'am," Alice replied with a smile. "But sorry to disappoint everyone, there were no little green men with antennas. The occupants of the craft were as human looking as you and me, only more glorious, and in a great many cases, more beautiful. Even old Asmet."

"Asmet?"

"He holds the keys to the wisdom of the ages. You can ask him about anything. He was one of the first ones I met, besides Tola and Tor."

"What do you mean your *body* was left in the car, Miss? Can you explain?"

Alice thought for a moment. "I presume, sir, it was similar to a life-after-life experience, like those stories that people have told about having a ... you know..."

"An NDE," another man remarked with a snicker.

"Excuse me, sir," said Alice. "A what?"

"Near Death Experience, Miss. If you believe in that sort of thing."

A chuckle went up from the crowd.

"Excuse us, Alice," said Will Morse, "but some of us take them tales with a grain of salt."

"I happen to believe those accounts, sir," said Alice. "I have a cousin who had an operation and she went to see the Lord, well not actually the Lord Himself, but an angel. I think it must have been the angel of the Book of Life. Before she went, she saw her body lying on the operating table. I must admit, when I first saw myself in the car, I wondered if I had died in my sleep!"

Alice giggled then gulped at the atmosphere of uneasiness in the room.

“So what *planet* did these angels, as you call them, come from?” a woman demanded.

“They didn’t seem to come from a planet, ma’am. They came more from another dimension. I presume the one we enter when we die. Heaven, really. Though Grandpa referred to it as Space City sometimes.”

Nervous coughs and murmurings followed Alice’s answer amid the pervading air of discomfort.

“So you’re a Christian?”

“I am, sir. I don’t go to church or anything, but I believe in Jesus.”

“So you actually believe that angels come from another dimension rather than another planet?”

“I do, ma’am.”

“That means you are a dimensionalist?”

“A what?”

“You believe in so-called spiritual dimensions?”

“I do.”

A bespectacled man sitting off to the side and puffing a pipe chortled. “Are you a member of a spiritualist society?”

With a touch of weariness, Alice shook her head, and Will Morse intervened.

“Friends, the point of having Miss Alice speak was for her to tell us of her rather out-of-the-ordinary—and yes, even out-of-this-dimension—experiences. We should at least grant her the audience and respect for her accounts that we would wish others to grant ours. Goodness knows we have to put up with a heck of a lot of criticism and mockery for *our* tales. In Alice’s words, she would probably wish us to ‘do unto her as we would have others do unto us.’”

“Those would not be *my* words, Mr. Morse,” said Alice with a smile, “but Jesus’.”

“Right so, Missy. Right so. ... Listen, Alice,” he whispered. “I’m a believer. Went back a bit on the Lord, I’m afraid—fell back on my church goin’ and stuff, and got into all this, but ... look, if you wish to just go ahead and testify of your faith, I’m with ya. And I’m sure Betty is too. Right, Bets?”

Betty smiled and nodded.

“Very well,” said Alice. “In that case, I think I’d feel better if I stood up.”

She did so, cleared her throat and addressed the audience. “Before I start, I would like to say that I am not one to give sermons. I have the hardest time even quoting a memory verse or a key promise at a fellow-

ship, but with the help of the Lord and His spirit helpers, I'll go ahead and share with you what I feel you could benefit from. This experience on the key craft was life changing for me, most of all because it proved to me that the spirit world is real. Up until then, I had followed by faith, and then the Lord blessed me with a tangible manifestation. But in all of that, I am reminded of what Jesus said to Thomas, 'because ye have seen, ye have believed, but...'"

"Blessed are they that have *not* seen and yet have believed," a number of the gathering chimed in, including Betty and Will.

"There," said Alice. "You know the verse! So it seems I need not elaborate, except to say that with all of our sightings, experiences, thrills, trips, journeys, and so on, the most important thing is that we are close to Jesus, regardless of whether we ever experience some far-out thing in our life. Right?"

Scattered responses of "amen" and "that's right" followed from the group, and Alice continued.

"So if you don't mind, I would like you to join me in a prayer. If you don't already have Jesus in your heart, you can ask Him to come in right now. It's simple, and you can ask Him to show you great and mighty things that you knew not. Even more exciting than UFOs! Shall we?"

With the exception of a few blank stares at the ceiling, most of the gathering bowed their heads as Alice prayed, and joined in a heartfelt "amen" of assent once she had finished. The atmosphere was thick with a tangible presence of love and warmth, causing some to weep and Alice to sit down trembling, wondering if she had really said what she had.

Will stood up and hugged Alice.

"Should have you givin' altar calls, Missy," he said. "Ya'd have all of Texas saved in no time!"

"Why thank you, Mr. Morse, but it really was nothing *I* did. ..."

"So, dear friends," Will announced with a clap, "unless there is anything else..."

"I have somethin', Will!" a radiant woman exclaimed. "I just want to say that when Miss Alice here was prayin', I saw 'em!"

"You saw what?"

"I saw 'em! I must admit I was jes' a-sittin' there durin' the prayer at first, starin' into space. I didn't see no need and wanted nothin' to do with it and that's when I saw 'em!"

"Saw what, Darla?"

"Them angels she was talkin' about! They was floatin' up and down and some was flying all around her head. Shinin' they was."

"What did they look like, ma'am?" Alice asked.

“Some was like li'l fairies, with wings.”

“They would be the Fairy Angel Fighters,” said Alice.

“Oh and there were others, none of those had wings, but yup, they was human lookin', men and women and jes' beautiful. There was an old man with long white hair and beard with a braid on one side, standin' right by Alice. He wore some kinda helmet. ...”

“That's Asmet!” said Alice.

“I tell ya, folks, it was as real as you sittin' right there, Miss Alice and Mr. Morse.

“I mean, was I like the only one?” the woman added, looking around the crowd.

“I saw it, too,” said the bespectacled British man. “I didn't want to believe it, and I still don't to some extent.”

“Why on earth not?” the woman asked.

“It shoots holes in all I've promoted and believed. You see, I'm a psychiatrist and a doctor of psychic and cosmic phenomena. UFOs and outer space appealed to my logic as long as I could keep it within the physical realm of the laws of the universe and human understanding. What I just saw comes well nigh to destroying all that.

“In fact, plain and simply it has embarrassed me. I feel if I go back to my scientific study and lectures, holding on to my past mindsets I would be living a lie. I have to accept that what I saw was real, or that I am mentally unstable, or that I was affected by the circumstances and thought projection of those around me.

“The latter two are certainly not the case, therefore I would logically have to admit that yes, Alice's experience could be real—which I am not prepared to do. Where I should go from here, I have yet to decide.”

“I will pray for you,” said Alice. “Mr. ...?”

The man puffed his pipe and smirked. “Blathering, Miss. Dr. Barnard Blathering. Thank you for your offer, but that will not be necessary.”

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DO I KNOW YOU FROM SOMEWHERE?

Although it was eleven o'clock at night by the time Betty hauled Big Bertha into the car park, it seemed the whole trailer camp was alive with music and noisy activity.

“Trailerville never sleeps,” said Betty. “So if you were planning on gettin' a good night's rest, fergit it.”

“I am a little tired,” said Alice. “But this is so exciting. Mummy calls me a night owl, 'cos I always want to stay up late.”

“Doing what?”

“Oh, usually watching a movie or reading. I am not particularly fond of reveille.”

“Well, sorry, but there’s plenty of revelry here, Miss Alice.”

“Really? So they do have a wake-up time?”

“Nope. Some of the likes who stay in these here places don’t have no fixed times of work. Migrant labourers. But you know what?”

Betty climbed out of the truck and helped Alice down. “These here folks are the real thing, know what I’m sayin’?”

“Betty baby!”

“A case in point,” Betty whispered to Alice.

“Bull! How did ya know I was here?”

“Saw Big Bertha pullin’ in and my heart done skipped.”

“Alice, meet ‘Bull’ Benson. He’s an invaluable local construction worker, handyman, plumber...”

“And...,” the hefty, blond burr-cut Texan began with a grin.

“That too,” said Betty.

Alice curtsied and the man took a step back.

“Is she fer real?”

“As real as it gets,” said Betty. “She came second in the Miss Apple Pie competition.”

“Phew, I’d be doggone, and I’d sure like to meet the winner if she done beat that.”

“Alice is British,” said Betty.

“I see. Well, you guys wanna come over to ma trailer fer a li’l night cap?”

“Alice don’t drink.”

“She can have a hot chocolate. But I guess you is goin’ to be more interested in the surprise guest in your trailer, Betty.”

“Guest?”

“He showed up this afternoon sayin’ that somethin’ told him to drop on by. He let hisself in. Know any dudes you’ve given the key to your ‘city’ to lately, Betty?”

“Can’t say as I do. But it’s mighty nice to see ya, Bull. And we can take a rain check on the nightcap, okay?”

Bull nodded, winked, and waved goodnight. Betty escorted Alice through the lanes of trailers until they stopped in front of a large old, but well-maintained Airstream caravan. A light was on inside, and Betty had barely found her key when the door opened.

“Ron!”

“Mom!” exclaimed the tall, handsome, dark-haired seventeen-year-old boy who granted her a self-conscious but affectionate hug.

He seems ever so familiar, Alice thought as her heart stopped. And he had a paperclip piercing his nostril.

“And this is Alice,” said Betty. “She’s British.”

Alice curtsied and winced. “Ever s-so pleased to make your acquaintance, young sir,” she said, despairingly sinking her face into her hands.

“She’s had a long day, Ron,” said Betty.

“Is she an actress or something?” her son asked in a whisper.

“Like royalty?”

“No ... you tell him, Alice.”

“Tell him what, ma’am?”

“He’s wondering if you’re an actress or royalty.”

“Neither. Why?”

“Well, we don’t get to see you regal-type chicks around these days except in movies ... like hangin’ out in palaces.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, young sir,” Alice said with a bashful smile.

“I’m far from disappointed,” said Ron, pitching Alice into an excruciating blush.

“Er ... Ron,” said Betty, “I think we both would appreciate one of your special hot toddies.”

“A ‘slam-dunk’?”

Betty winked at Alice. “It’s Ron’s very own speciality. The perfect nightcap.”

“I’m sure it’s delicious,” said Alice, “but I don’t drink.”

“In that case, he can leave out the hooch.”

“So how come you’re hangin’ out with Mom?” Ron asked Alice while he tossed chocolate powder, a raw egg, cream, and some bottled ingredients into a blender and Betty browsed the newspaper.

“It’s a very long story, young sir. And with much mysterious detail that I fear would be difficult for you to comprehend.”

“Try me.”

“If I may say so, Master Trucker, you seem familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?”

“I don’t think so, but that’s a great opening come-on. ‘Haven’t we met before?’ You know the type of thing in the movies.”

“Movies!” Alice exclaimed. “That’s it! I’ve seen you in a film!”

“Sssh!”

“What’s up, Ron?”

“Oh nothing, Mom.”

“It was meant to be a surprise,” Ron whispered to Alice. “She knew I’d gone off to Hollywood. I didn’t want to make a big deal about anything until I’d got somethin’ concrete, know what I’m sayin’?”

“I understand perfectly,” said Alice. “You preferred not to count your chickens until they were hatched.”

Ron poured his blended concoction into a pot and turned on the stove. “But I haven’t even got any *eggs* yet, much less chickens, so how come you saw me in a movie?”

“I don’t know, but it was in some originally rather insipid adolescent fare that subsequently was much improved. It was called *Love, Type Thing*.”

“Well, it couldn’t have been me, because to get a foot in that biz I’m having to start off with a bit of modelling.” Ron grimaced.

“Then maybe it wasn’t you,” said Alice. “Cos the actor’s name was Colin Rumford. They nicknamed him ‘Rummy.’...”

Alice gasped and clasped her mouth. *Oh my gosh! Why hadn’t I realised this before...?*

“Hey, that’s wild! I have a bunch of Chicano* friends, and they call me ‘Rum’ or ‘Rummy,’ ’cos Ron is Spanish for rum!”

Alice stood stunned. *It’s Rummy himself, but he’s no longer a playing card! Oh Jesus, this could get complicated.*

Shaking his head in wonderment, Ron turned off the stove. “You wouldn’t by any chance be starring in that series ... you know, from one of Grace M. Allsop’s novels, *Mallory Park*?”

Alice recovered her poise and smiled. “Er ... I told you I’m not an actress. I have heard of Grace Allsop, though, as my cousin has read everything by her, but I am in no wise involved in any films except a piece that Brandon, my brother, is filming on his camcorder about a Norse legend.”

“Everything okay over there, kids?” Betty drowsily asked.

“Fine, Mom,” Ron said with a smile at Alice as he poured her a mug of his brew. “And toddy’s ready.”

“Sorry I’m so tired,” Betty said with a yawn, accepting her son’s drink. “Once I get this down, I might jes’ nod off in this chair if you don’t mind.”

“Your mother’s had ever such a long hard day of driving,” said Alice.

“But maybe you wanna show Miss Alice here ’round the trailer park,” said Betty. “Not much ta’ see, but it’s an interestin’ view of this side of the tracks.”

Ron’s eyes lit up and Alice blushed again.

“Jes’ don’t be back too late. The li’l missy needs her beauty sleep.”

“Not from what I can see,” said Ron, causing Alice’s face to once again turn a deep red. She swallowed hard and flung open the trailer door to the cooling night’s breeze.

Chicano: a North American man or boy of Mexican descent

Ron gave his mother a gallant kiss on the cheek, which didn't go unnoticed by Alice, and he joined her on the gravel outside.

"As you see, on our right we have the ever-awake Granger family," Ron said, as he and Alice sauntered between the lanes of RVs, mobile homes, and trailers. "Guaranteed to be engaged in a drunken shouting match at two o'clock in the morning and sleeping in 'til midday. And on our left is the venerable Scott Brady, a retired hippie who plays his antique psychedelic vinyls until all hours, while choking his neighbours to death with pot smoke. ... Oh, but you probably don't even know..."

"Oh, indeed I do," said Alice. "Brandon—that's my older brother by the way—knows ever such a lot about that period."

Ron shrugged. "So you are like, 'hip'? I thought by your style and speech that you're kind of ... out of time."

"You could say that," said Alice. "But I do not dress or talk this way in real life."

"Real life?"

"Oh, it's ever such a long story."

"So you said. Well, at least try me with the opening paragraph."

About ten minutes later, Ron was shaking his head and wandering entranced out of the trailer park entrance with Alice following him.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry if it all seems absurd," said Alice. "But you did ask."

"Let's go get a Coke or a milkshake or something," said Ron, pointing to a brightly lit diner across the highway.

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TUMBLEWEED* AND MILKSHAKES

So, what'll it be? A milkshake?" Ron asked above the music as they entered the Tumbleweed diner, which turned out to be a late-night hangout for the youth of the surrounding trailer parks.

"That would be splendid!" said Alice.

"Flavour?"

"You choose."

"We can sit in the booths out back in the restaurant area," Ron grinningly said, returning with two purple mega milkshakes. He handed one to Alice.

***tumbleweed:** any densely branched plant that grows in arid regions and in late summer withers and breaks from its roots to be blown about by the wind

“Woah, rum, rum, Rummy!” jeered a member of a group of youths gathered by the video gaming machines as Ron made his way through them with Alice behind him.

“Keep walking, Alice,” said Ron.

“Hey, I’m talkin’ to you, man!”

“Cool it, Herbie.”

“*Me* cool it, Rummy? Maybe *you* should try takin’ yer own advice. Didn’t know you were hot for kid sisters in fancy dress.”

His eyes burning with fury, Ron turned and caught Alice’s which were flashing him caution. Herbie smirked and stepped in front of them and three of his cohorts joined him in blocking Ron and Alice’s passage.

“Excuse us, Herbie,” Ron said as calmly as he could. “We need to go sit down.”

“Sorry, Rummy. It is a little *tight* in here. But maybe your little girl-friend likes it that way!”

Ron clenched a fist, and it looked as though a fight was about to break out. Feeling at a loss, Alice impulsively threw the contents of her milkshake into Herbie’s face, drawing snickers from his little gang.

“What’s funny, guys?” he sputtered through the dripping purple liquid that was now soaking his sweatshirt.

“Dunno, Herbie,” said one of his associates. “Except it *is* awesome to see a little chick put Herbie Hasseldork in his place.”

“Step outside, Rummy,” said Herb. “We’ll finish this.”

“Excuse me, young sir,” Alice said softly. “Your quarrel is not with Master Trucker here, but with *me*. One of your friends should get you some serviettes, by the way. Cannot imagine you fighting *anyone* in that sorry state.”

Alice’s remarks brought more sniggers from the gang, which so further infuriated Herbie that he could only stand with his fists clenched and glare at Ron and Alice.

“Excuse me,” said Alice, feeling the key ring burning in her pocket. She pulled it out; a key was directed at Herbie’s waist.

“What the hell are you doin’?”

“Just checking on something, young sir.”

Suddenly Herbie let out a squeal and his surrounding gang erupted into laughter. The elastic of his sweat suit bottoms had given out, causing them to slide to his ankles.

“Hey! Leopard skin briefs!” hooted one of his cohorts.

“Herbie Hasseldork,” said another, “—Tarzan’s not-so-mild-mannered alter ego! Who’d a-guessed?”

Alice clasped a hand on her mouth to stifle a giggle and Ron shook his head in amazement as the snickering gang dispersed, leaving Herbie standing speechless.

"I guess we can carry on," Ron said. "I'll just go get you another milkshake."

"No need," said one of Herbie's sidekicks, who suddenly appeared with a tray of blueberry mega milkshakes. "They're on us. The field needed a little ... er ... *levelling*," he added with a sideways look at Herbie. "See ya, guys."

"Farewell," said Alice as she turned to follow Ron into the restaurant area. She caught herself and turned to Herbie.

"Care to join us, young sir?"

"*Alice!*" protested Ron.

"We have milkshake to spare, as you can see," Alice persisted, "and it would be ever such a shame to waste them."

"I-I don't see why y'all should..." Herbie managed to whimper.

Alice smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. "Well, it seems we're the only friends you have for tonight, so wipe yourself off, pull up your trousers, and come."

"Two's company," Ron indignantly muttered to Alice as Herbie traipsed sheepishly behind them. "Three's a crowd, remember?"

"This shouldn't take long," Alice whispered. "Then you can walk me back to the trailer and we can talk there."

"Th-this is cool of you guys," Herbie mumbled finally after downing his milkshake. "I mean like after me being such a..."

Alice blushed at Herbie's self-deprecating terminology that to her and Ron's surprise solicited his apology.

"Apology accepted, young sir," said Alice.

"See, Herbie," said Ron. "Alice is from a cool era. Chivalry, etiquette, and all that."

"That's an obvious, Rummy. But can you find me some more from wherever you picked up this one? A little older, though."

"I didn't 'pick her up,' Herbie. She's a friend of my mom's."

"Whatever. But we sure could use this type of chick around here rather than the typical trailer park trash."

"If I may interject, kind sirs," said Alice. "Maybe if some of the young men here were to work on their Christian graces and chivalry, it would inspire other young girls to pull up their socks in the spirit. Actually, I wish you could meet some of my junior teen female friends at home. They're a lot like me, only better in many cases. Much more affectionate and thoughtful. Much more beautiful too. ..."

"That's impossible—you're *gorgeous!*" Ron said, making Alice glad for the camouflage of the low reddish lighting.

"O-only, they don't talk and dress like I do," Alice went on. "In those respects, they're probably much more like the girls you're used to. Oh my goodness..."

Alice fell into a silent fluster. The whole scenario was beginning to overwhelm her, she was missing home and friends, and she felt like crying.

I need some time with You, Jesus. It's been just one thing after another.

Wait, My dearest. I will arrange it.

"It's gonna be okay, babe," said Ron, instinctively taking her hand.

"I think that's my cue to leave," said Herbie, standing up. "It's been great meeting you. You guys are way cool."

"Wait, young sir," said Alice and reached for his arm. "Do sit back down. I wouldn't want you to leave without a special gift. ..."



"Wow. That was *awesome!*" Ron exclaimed as he and Alice strolled back to the trailer park. "To get Herbie Hasseldork, the biggest bully of trailer city praying like that..."

"But you seemed indisposed to pray along with him, Ron."

Ron shrugged. "Nah, I'm good, and I ... ah ... have my own thoughts ... philosophy, if you like."

"Which is?"

"There are many paths. Jesus was a great man and a wise teacher and all that, but..."

"He was actually a liar or a nutcase!" said Alice.

"What?"

"If as you say, He was just a great man, but went around saying He was the Son of God and that no one could come to God but through Him, it's logical to conclude that He was either ragingly delusional or a liar."

"Hey, I wasn't saying that..." Ron began, but by then, they had arrived at the trailer. Upon quietly entering, they saw that Betty was snoring in the double bed at the back.

"I ... er... can sleep in the lorry," Alice whispered, noticing Ron's concern. "—Your mom's truck, that is."

"No way. There's a pull-down closet bed for you, and I can sleep on the floor."

"But..."

Ron picked up the saucepan from the stove. "There's quite a bit more toddy left. It's cold, but it tastes great with ice. And we can talk some more..."

To be continued...

HEAVEN'S
LIBRARY

Issue 232

Apparently Alice

Part Four



The story so far: After attending church with the Truckers, Alice and Betty continued their journey south, showing up at a meeting of UFO enthusiasts, and then stopping for the night at Betty's home in a trailer park. There, Alice made the acquaintance of Betty's son, Rummy.

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A ROADBLOCK AND A MILLSTONE

When Alice awoke the next morning to Betty's whistling, the smell of scrambled eggs, and Ron sleeping on a mat beside her, it took her a few moments to recognise where she was.

"Sorry if it's a mite early, Alice," said Betty. "But we do need to be hittin' the road. Seems like y'all had a late one."

"We did, ma'am," said Alice.

"And it was awesome," Ron muttered, half in his sleep.

"Whoa," said Betty with a giggle.

"Not what you think, Mom. Just real deep conversation. Must have finally hit the hay around four-thirty. Right, Alice?"

"S-so where are we going to now, ma'am?" Alice quickly asked to draw attention from another uncontrollable blush.

"Need to get across the border," said Betty. "But before that, we need to establish your identity and make those plans we talked about. Over easy on your eggs?"

"Umm, at your discretion, ma'am."

"Ron?"

"Not so hungry, Mom."

"A healthy young man losing his appetite is usually a symptom of only jes' one thing," Betty said with a cheeky grin and looked at Alice who buried her blushing face in the pillow.

"I'll grab something later," said Ron, climbing into a sweatsuit. "I need to write a letter before you guys leave."

"Ain't seen ya in months, and you go off to write a letter?" Betty called from the foldout dining table. "Want me to drop it in the mail?"

HL: Note that all parts of this story use British spelling.

Art by Jeremy; shades by Sabine

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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“It’ll be delivered personally,” said Ron.

“We need to move along, Alice, baby,” Betty said presently, getting up from her seat. “You can leave the dishes. This shipment is a little behind schedule as it is. Pay gets docked if it’s late—that happens too many times and you’re fired.”

Standing out by Big Bertha, Betty hugged her son and admonished him to stay in touch.

“And give me warnin’ when you next show up,” she said. “But it was wonderful seein’ jes’ a little of you.”

“It was wonderful seein’ you, Mom. And ... er”—Ron’s eyes fell and his feet shuffled—“Miss Alice too. Made a big diff’ in my life. She can tell you all about it, I guess.”

With his head still bowed, Ron gave Alice an awkward hug and slipped her an envelope.

“Thanks, Alice,” he mumbled, then hurriedly sauntered back into the trailer park.

Hey,

This is like big-time out of character for me to write feelings and stuff, so stay with me, okay? Well, it’s like I don’t really know what’s happening to me—know what I’m saying? Once you fell asleep, I prayed that prayer you told me to, and I slept like a baby with awesome peace. It’s incredible, especially after I argued the ... you know what out of you. I just couldn’t go for this Jesus thing after seeing what my grandparents’ church and religion had done to Mom. But then I thought about how Mom loves you to bits, and how you handled Herbie. Well, it told me tons, ’cos you walk the walk and talk the talk, as they say. So, okay. I’m converted. Thanks.

But I still have issues; walk me through them, okay? Well actually only one majorly. You can laugh ’cos it sounds as lame as it gets, but in some ways you’re like the kid sister I never had. Okay, I told you it’s corny. But I like you a lot and I’m gonna miss you and I have to deal with it.

Better go. Here’s my e-mail, and don’t show this letter to Mom.

Ron

Alice folded the letter and put it back into the envelope. Reclining her seat, she sighed wearily and closed her eyes.

“He likes you, doesn’t he?” said Betty.

Alice nodded.

“Not surprisin’. For my part, I couldn’t wish anythin’ better for my son than a friend like you.”

Alice smiled wanly and stifled a yawn.

“Go to sleep, baby. On this freeway, it’s smooth sailin’ at least for three hours to the border. ... Uh-oh.”

“What?” Alice said sleepily.

“Roadblock. Nothin’ unusual—probably checkin’ for illegal wares.”

“I rebuke Disruptor,” Alice muttered to herself. “And I claim Vigilance’s help.”

After waiting behind a long line of vehicles with a cordon of policemen waving them through, Betty and Alice watched dumfounded as two of them approached their truck and announced, “We’ve got ’em!”

“Got who?” Alice asked Betty.

Betty shrugged until she saw a familiar figure walking behind the policeman, accompanied by a white-suited balding man who appeared to be his mid-forties.

“Tammy!” Betty exclaimed.

“And the gentleman who was on the television show!” said Alice.

“Yup. Pastor Hal Hamstrung,” said Betty with a groan and rolled down her window.

“You folks off someplace?” a young Highway Patrol officer asked.

“Mexico,” said Betty. “Soybean shipment.”

“Hmmm,” the officer said, turning to address Tammy. “So this is the party you were concerned about?”

“That’s right, Officer!” she shrieked. “My sister is in the clutches of this evil witch!”

“Kindly step out of the truck, ma’am,” the officer said to Betty. “And put your hands on your head.”

“Didn’t you get my drift, Officer?” said Tammy. “What the hell is wrong with you? Deaf or something?”

“Okay, okay, calm down, ma’am. The driver of this truck is, as you say, the ‘evil witch’ who’s abducted your younger sister? Right?”

“No!”

“I believe it’s the young lady in the passenger seat,” Pastor Hal said calmly. “Her name is apparently Alice.”

“So, ‘Apparently’ Alice,” said the officer, looking somewhat mystified at her. “Can I see your ID?”

Alice handed him the ring of keys.

“So what are you giving me these for? A birthday present?”

“Umm ... I’m dreadfully sorry, sir,” said Alice. “My mind was a little absent just then.”

“The last few days have been hectic for the poor girl,” said Betty. “She’s tired.”

“I understand. ID, Miss?”

“I’m afraid she doesn’t have one,” said Betty. “She lost it on the way ... er ... *down* here.”

“Hmm. Then we’re going to have to take her in for identification and questioning.”

“Okay, but what’s with the roadblock?” Betty asked.

“I think I can explain,” said Pastor Hal, stepping forward. “Miss Tammy expressed concern that the girl in question was leading her sister astray into scripturally forbidden heinous doctrines and possibly witchcraft.”

“You informed us that your secretary’s sister was in grave danger, sir,” said the officer. “We didn’t assume there were any religious issues involved—those are not our concern. Have any crimes been committed?”

“What do you mean, ‘have any crimes been committed?’” Tammy asked. “Stumbling a believer in Christ such as my sister is crime enough, according to scripture.”

“Never heard you refer to me that way before, Tam,” said Betty. “Thanks.”

“Better a millstone be tied around the offender’s neck, Officer,” said Pastor Hal.

“We don’t deal in millstones, sir. Just concrete legalities. If you can *specify* her crime...”

Tammy smiled sarcastically. “I just did. Causing one of the brethren to stumble!”

“Vague, to say the least, ma’am,” said the officer.

“I’ve got it!” said Pastor Hal. “You could book her as mentally deranged and attempting to enter as an illegal alien. In the interests of Tam and her sister’s safety—and I would venture to say, that of many members of society—this girl *should* be detained.”

The officer exhaled impatiently. “What I am trying to establish here, sir, is the *reason* for taking the girl into custody besides possibly being an illegal alien. Bottom line is, what charges will you press?”

“Ummm ... I ... er... we...”

“Of course we’ll press charges!” Tammy exclaimed. “Communing with spirits, for one.”

“Anything a bit more illegal?”

Pastor Hal and Tammy looked at each other in blank silence.

“Okay,” said the officer. “We’ll book her for illegal entry if we do not establish her identity. That’ll be enough for now.”

“It *won’t* be enough!” said Tammy. “Mr. Hamstrung intends to expose her on his forthcoming *Hallelujah Hour!*”

“Whatever,” said the officer and motioned for Alice to step out of the truck.

“You can’t do this!” Betty protested in tears. “She’s done me no harm. In fact, we have been the closest of friends.”

The policeman raised an eyebrow, and turned to Alice who was now in tears also and standing outside the truck. “Nothing inappropriate occurred, I take it, Miss?”

Betty’s face flushed and her fists clenched. “Why, if you weren’t an officer of the law, I’d...”

The officer raised his hand. “It’s okay, ma’am. Just routine enquiry. So, Miss ‘apparently’ Alice, get your belongings and come with me.”

A woman subordinate stepped forward with a pair of handcuffs, to which the officer rolled his eyes. “Not necessary, Sadie.”

“It may be,” said Tammy. “Don’t be fooled!”

“I’ll take my chances,” said the officer. “Okay. Let’s git goin’ here.”

“Can I come with you?” Betty pleaded. “She’ll need help. She’s hardly acquainted with the judicial system of the Useless Status.”

The officer chuckled. “The Useless Status? That’s a good one.”

“Is that what I said? Oh, my. I didn’t mean that. Must be all this time I’ve done spent with ... never mind.”

“Look, ma’am. The young lady is now in our custody, and as you have no legal relationship to her, you simply aren’t entitled to any contact until the case is resolved. But,” he said, lowering his voice, “if you leave me with your contact details, I can inform you of any developments. My name is Police Officer Wainwright.”

“My card,” said Betty, reaching into her dungarees. “Care of Lonely Highway Trucking Federation.”

Leaving Tammy and Pastor Hal standing at the roadside, the police car roared away, and through its back window, Alice tearfully watched Betty climb disconsolately back into her truck.

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ALICE HAMSTRUNG*

The Chief Highway Patrol officer grunted, coughed, pulled his seat up to the desk and checked the tiny metal fan. It was on high. He mopped his brow.

“It is rather hot, today, sir,” said Alice, noticing the sweat stains on the armpits of his shirt. But Officer Wayne Taggart, as was noted

*hamstrung: thwarted, made ineffective

on his nametag, did seem friendly. He sipped at his Styrofoam cup of coffee, took a bite of a large hamburger in a Styrofoam box, wiped his mustard-dripping fingers on a napkin and smiled.

“I imagine especially fo’ you in that there outfit, young madam.”

Alice conceded with a nod and a tired smile.

“We can get you a change of clothes.”

“That will not be poss ... er ... necessary, sir,” said Alice. “But thank you.”

Officer Taggart started typing. “So you say your name is Alice Godley.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and as the officer browsed, she fumbled expectantly with the key ring. A key flashed, *Truth*.

“Mighty interesting key ring ya got there. A gift?”

“Sort of.”

“Hmmm. Now, there’s no record of your name on our database. Realise that?”

“I imagine that is possible.”

“Parents Eileen and Malcolm Godley, you said? Thirty-five and thirty-eight years of age respectively?”

Alice nodded. Taggart typed some more, muttered something and shook his head. “Again. No record.”

“Oh, sir! Try Alice *Pleasance*.”

The officer took a bite of his hamburger and another sip of coffee. “Ah yes,” he continued, after more typing and muttering, “an entry here on Ogle.com says, ‘A case history of Alice Pleasance, committed to St. Domino’s psychiatric facility on ... da-da-da ... Acute Era Reversal Syndrome ... da-da-da.’ ... And Wickedpaedia says: ‘Alice Pleasance’s notorious and twisted persona became the beleaguered and psychotically delusional protagonist in the underground novel, *Alice and the Cards*.’ That ring a bell?”

Alice nodded. “That’s me in a ... er ... *Heaven’s Library Book*.”

“You wrote it?”

“No. But it *is* about me. I mean, depicted in another dimension. It’s embarrassing really, having my experiences and thoughts and everything being printed for the whole Family.”

Taggart chuckled. “One’s family can be one’s worst critics. Okay, Missy. We’re going to have to wrap this up. So, how did you get into the United States of America? By plane?”

Alice shook her head.

“By car?”

Alice shook her head again.

“A wetback operation?”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

“Did some person or persons smuggle you across the Rio Grande?”

Alice giggled. “Oh no, sir.”

“Then how?”

“A key craft dropped me here.”

“A what?”

“A space vehicle somewhat like a UFO dropped me off in the middle of a Midwestern highway.”

“Okay,” said Taggart who washed down the last bite of hamburger with his last sip of coffee and addressed a co-worker in the next office.

“Dilbert! Get Barney on the line—you know, the psychiatrist.”

“A psychiatrist?” said Alice. “What on earth for?”

“This case is a bit out of our league, Missy. Mental ill ... irregularity is not under our jurisdiction.”

“I grant my story is a little hard to believe, sir, but do you think I’m round the bend?”

“That’s not for me to judge. Could be a simple issue like temporary amnesia. That’s why we’re calling in Dr. Blathering.”

“Dr. Blathering?” Alice said with a gasp. “*Barnard* Blathering?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Sir,” said Alice, “Dr. Blathering is a member of Sighters United. If my story seems barmy to you, then why not book him and *all* the members of the Sighters United for that matter. They have seen and experienced a lot more untoward peculiarity than me.”

“In that case, it may just play out that Dr. Blathering will be sympathetic and give you a clean bill of mental health,” said Taggart, mopping his brow again and standing up. “He’ll be here in about half an hour. So, Miss Pleasance, you may wait in the lobby.”



About an hour and a half later, Dr. Blathering, puffing on his pipe, was standing in the office calmly pronouncing his verdict to Alice and Officer Taggart.

“So, in light of these tests and indications showing that her aberrational behaviour is more than a mere case of amnesia, we’re granting Miss ... er ... Pleasance an all-expenses-paid vacation at the Buena Vista Mental Wellness Spa in Weston. We can arrange immediate and swift transportation.”

“Excuse me, doctor,” Alice said, “but what is this place?”

“It’s a psychiatric resort, Miss,” Blathering said coldly, avoiding her earnest gaze.

“A ‘loony bin’?”

Dr. Blathering clucked and condescendingly shook his head. “Far and above your simplistic and childish assumption, Miss, Buena Vista is a five-star Mental Wellness Spa. Excellent facilities, therapy, and buffet. And their room service when necessary is impeccable.”

“But Doctor Blathering,” said Alice. “You yourself have experienced...”

“We’ve already gone over that, Miss Pleasance. I’m sorry.”

Wayne Taggart mopped his brow, sniffed his armpits and gathered his papers. He looked apologetically at Alice.

“Don’t worry, Miss. Buena Vista’s clean ‘n’ carin’. You’ll do great there.”

Alice was tempted to despair, but because of her experiences in gathering the cards, a sensation of assurance overwhelmed her.

“It *will!*” she said to herself.

“Will what?” Blathering demanded.

“Work out for good, sir. *All* things work together for good to them...”

“That love the Lord,” said Taggart. “Why, Miss Alice ...”

“What?”

“You is a believer.”

“I assumed you knew, sir.”

“The taxi is here, Miss,” said Dr. Blathering. “Get your belongings.”

“She has nothin’ but that there backpack, Wally,” said Taggart.

“Look”—Taggart clasped Alice’s hand and lowered his voice—“if there’s anything I can do, don’t hesitate to contact me. Here’s my card.”

“I appreciate that, kind sir.”



“No ID, no papers, no social security number,” said Dr. Blathering. “Just a knapsack and the anomalous clothes on her back, by her account. Her name’s apparently Alice.”

“Another one,” mumbled the receptionist.

“Another one?” Alice asked.

“Umm hmm. A girl in here says she’s Alice from Wonderland. A mite taller than you, an’ possibly a little older. She’s from around these parts actually. Real name is ... let me see...”

The receptionist checked the computer. “Dudley. That’s it. Deidre Dudley. Suite 703. Mother brought her in about four months ago, said she was delusional and had been expelled from high school for ‘retrograde values influence.’ The girl was a mite strange, like you

Miss, wearing all that funny old-fashioned stuff and talkin' posh, but nothing harmful. The mother was beside herself with worry, though, so Dr. Blathering kindly pronounced Deidre in a state of mental unwellness and made a reservation for her here. Next thing, Momma had taken off for the Costa Brava with her new boyfriend."

"That is so sad!" said Alice.

"I wouldn't say that exactly, but that's life. So ... suite 210 for observation, Miss ... er ... 'apparently' Alice. A nurse will escort you there. Thank you, Dr. Blathering."

"My pleasure, Jill."

Alice was beyond crying at this point, and while she was being committed, she was committing her future, thoughts, whims, and will into Jesus' hands. He was taking care of her, she knew it, and she was now at a point of welcoming the next unforeseen bend in the road of this unusual adventure. The nurse who accompanied her to what Alice referred to as her cell, despite the nurse's insistence that it was her "accommodation," was soft spoken and sweet natured. She shook her head as if in apology for the dismal neon lit room boasting only a bed and bathroom.

"I must say, I don't care too much for the padded walls," said Alice.

"Acoustic insulation, Miss."

"Ah, but you most certainly wouldn't wish to live here yourself, would you, ma'am?" Alice asked with a wry smile.

"To be honest," said the nurse, "nope. But I'll do what I can to make it liveable. Flowers?"

"That would be ever so nice!" said Alice. "And a rather less severe lighting arrangement ... a lantern or even some candles would do splendidly."

"I jes' picked up a load of that kinda stuff at a garbage sale," said the nurse. "My hubby hated it, so it's up for grabs. Might have to be a bit secretive about the candles, though. They get a mite worried around here that inmates ... er ... guests will ... you know ... I'm Faye, by the way. Faye Langley."

Alice curtseyed and the nurse smiled.

"You's a sweet li'l thing for bein' ... er..."

"Batty?" said Alice.

"Well, I wouldn't put it quite like that. You know..." The nurse's voice took on a tone of confidentiality. "I have acquaintances and even family who I think could use some time in here more than folks the likes of you. One uncle o'mine, filthy rich, I swear he's jes' plain bonkers. But he's got the world at his feet, know what I'm sayin'?"

“I think so, ma’am,” said Alice, “but ‘if madness is to be glad’ ... Is your uncle happy?”

“Far from it,” said Faye. “Miserable as sin, and tries to get company by makin’ everyone around him as miserable as he is. Me, me, me, and *more* me and then some. That’s all it is with him.”

“Hmmm,” said Alice. “Grandpa said that insanity is really selfishness.”

“Well, judgin’ by my experience,” Faye continued, “your gramps is right. Anyways, anything I can get you? A change of clothes?”

“Thank you, kind madam. But I fear that I am restricted to this attire for the duration of my adventure.”

“Maybe a launder, then?”

Alice agreed, undressed, handed over her clothes, and declined Faye’s offer of a night snack, being so tired that even the stark, linen-clad cot represented sweet repose.

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“MISS DEIRDRE DUDLEY TO YOU, SIR”

Room service!”

The following morning, Alice awoke to this announcement from behind her door and a key turning in the lock. Faye Langley entered carrying a large shopping bag, which she emptied onto the bed.

“Here are your clothes. I washed and dried ’em last night, and this is what I managed to rustle up. Like I said, you’ll have to keep the candles discreet. Just use ’em at night when you’re done sure the orderlies have made their rounds. I did bring some pretty placemats, pillowcases, a bedside lamp that’s a li’l wobbly on the connection so jes’ don’t jiggle it too much, some toiletries, a box of cookies, a pack of cards in case you need to while away some time with solitaires, and *this...*”

Alice gasped. “The r-red book!”

“You know it?”

“It’s absolutely amazing, ma’am. I don’t understand why, but ... indeed I do, very much.”

“It was my dad’s when he was younger,” said Faye. “Just ’fore he got married. Don’t understand a lot of it, but I was flipping through it, saw this cute little thing about a girl called Alice, and thought maybe you’d appreciate it. If not, jes’ return it, I won’t be offended.”

“Far from such a thing, ma’am,” said Alice, placing the book at her bedside. “I appreciate this very much and I am ever so thrilled. ’Tis a book that... Was your father ever in the Family?”

“The family? You mean my relatives?”

“No. Let me see ... Ah, here in the back. ‘Copyright by the Children of God.’ Was he one of them?”

“Who? The Children of God?”

Alice nodded as she dressed.

“I don’t know,” said Faye. “He has never mentioned it if he was. But I trust he *is* one through the saving grace of Jesus. Anyway, I will show you to the breakfast room. Come with me, and just stay calm.”

“I shall try,” said Alice.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be among the more ‘non-disruptive’ guests.”

Stepping out of the elevator at the fifth floor, Alice accompanied Nurse Langley into a sunshine-flooded atrium decorated with numerous plants and surrounded by tall glass windows that looked out over the smog-shrouded city of Weston.

“For a mental asylum, this is a lovely restaurant,” said Alice. “I am sure the patients must like it very much.”

“We at Buena Vista Mental Wellness Spa try to give our *guests* the very best! So you may take a tray from the pile and serve yourself, buffet style. A waiter is always on duty to help with any unexpected occurrences with the guests.”

“You mean accidents?” Alice asked.

“Unexpected occurrences,” said Faye, “mishaps...”

Suddenly, there was a crashing of plates and silverware on the floor behind Alice, and a shriek followed. Alice turned to see a girl with long blonde hair and dressed in similar clothes shaking her head and staring open-mouthed at her.

“Let me help you,” said Alice, as she rushed over and began to gather up the cutlery and broken chinaware. An attendant rushed to her side with a mop. The girl was still standing speechless and shaking her head.

“Come, er ... Alice,” Faye said to the girl, taking her by the arm.

“I am not Alice!” the girl exclaimed, pointing to Alice. “*She* is the real Alice!”

“Don’t worry, dear. You’re the real Alice *too*,” Faye said gently. “Now let’s go.”

“Quit you this!” said the girl, yanking her arm away. “I can’t abide you treating me as if I am mad.”

“I am sorry, Alice.”

“I am Alice no longer, ma’am. My name is Deidre Dudley, do you not remember?”

“I do, Deidre,” said Faye, discreetly summoning for an orderly.

“You are *not* sorry. Spare me your sham condolence and fair speech. I do but wish to acquaint myself with the *real* Alice. Grant me at least this much.”

“Okay,” said Faye, dropping her hands and signalling the advancing orderly to back off for the moment.

The girl strode towards Alice, smiled, and with a graceful curtsy, extended her hand. Alice took it, but to her dismay, managed only a clumsy curtsy in return.

“So you are, like, Alice too?” she asked.

The girl shook her head. “No longer, now that the *real* Alice is here.”

By now, a number of patients had gathered around, disregarding Faye Langley’s admonitions to get their breakfast plates and eat. One of them, a tall greying gentleman wearing a threadbare green velvet suit and a matching top hat with a price tag tucked in its band, stepped forward.

“Alice, do you mind telling us what’s going on?”

“I am no longer Alice,” the girl replied. “I am now Miss Deidre Dudley to you, sir, and everyone else. Oh, by the way, Mr. Hatter, meet the *real* Alice, at long last.”

“Super cool to meet you,” said Alice with a tone of consternation, now having mixed feelings about her sudden switch to contemporary speech.

“The *real* Alice?” said Mr. Hatter, turning to Deidre. “How *could* you?”

“Could what?”

“Desert us like this?”

“I am not deserting you, Mr. Hatter, I am merely bestowing due deference where deference is due.”

“No, *never*,” said Mr. Hatter. “You have shattered a dream. And this afternoon was going to be our long-awaited tea party, don’t you remember?”

“I do,” said Deidre. “But unexpected circumstances have arisen. Namely that the true Alice in Wonderland has arrived.”

“No!” said Alice, detecting tears in the distraught man’s eyes. “My name *does* happen to be Alice, but I am *not* Alice in Wonderland. Like, *no way, Jose!*”

Deidre burst into tears. “If you are not, then you have shattered *my* dream,” she said. “For in truth I have longed for this day to meet you. I always knew I would.”

“But how can you shatter *our* dream, Alice?” the man said to Deidre. “This place was a dreary hellhole until you came along. You brought happiness and hope to us all. Don’t tell me it was all a vapour and you are now throwing it away because of this cuckoo impostor.”

“I think that it is time for us all to go about getting our breakfast and sitting down,” Faye said diplomatically and the patients, some

who had been standing holding their plates, dawdled to the dining tables where they ate in dejected silence.

"I feel like, ultra lousy, Nurse Langley," said Alice. "I've shattered their dream, and I'm clueless. What am I going to do?"

"Nothin'," said Faye. "I think it's good that they have had a li'l reality check. Don't hurt no one. And it seems like it ain't hurt you none, you've dropped that high falutin' talk.

"Although I did find it a charmin' breath of fresh air," she wistfully added. "Deidre Dudley attempts it, but it ain't as authentic as yern. Anyway, get your plate 'fore they start clearin' away the pots."

Alice glumly selected a plate of scrambled eggs, sausage, and toast, and settled herself at a single table by the window. After a few minutes, Faye approached her.

"I need to go take care of some *real* mental wellness challenges this mornin', Alice," she said. "But if there's anythin' I can get you or do for you, don't hesitate to call me on the intercom. Number 707."

"Thanks," Alice mumbled. "That's super sweet. Actually I would like a notebook and a pen, and the red book from my room, if possible."

"It's done, sweetheart. And down on the second floor, right across from the TV room is a nice quiet library with desks, armchairs, an' all. It don't get used a whole lot compared to the gamin' and TV rooms, so you should be fine there. Go check it out."



Alice was sitting in the library deep in thought when a small, stooped man with brown slicked-back hair, and dressed in a brown tweed jacket shuffled up to her. With a myopic peer over the top of his wire-rimmed spectacles, he bowed and handed her a notebook, a pen, and the red volume.

"Thank you ever so much, sir," said Alice, strangely relieved that she was now speaking in the usual manner befitting her attire, especially as the man seemed to be of highbred British stock.

"Yes, Miss, from Haversham," the man said, responding to Alice's mention of her observance.

"I am unfamiliar with that ... er ... town," she said.

"It's not even a village!" said the man. "It is but a bus stop, three pubs, a post office, and a grocer's. But it is beautiful just the same. The surrounding meadows are a nature rambler's dream."

"I'm sure they are, Mr. ...?"

"Oh, I do beg your pardon, Miss. My name is Wilfred Dormas."

Alice stood up, and to her relief, managed an elegant curtsy. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Dormas.”

The man straightened his red bow tie. “So you will most certainly be coming to Mr. Hatter’s tea party this afternoon, Miss Alice.”

“Alas, I think not.”

“Why on earth not?”

“Well, sir, I was led to believe that the tea party has in fact been cancelled. There was some confusion over this morning’s breakfast concerning it.”

“You heard this at breakfast, Miss Alice? I regret to say that being among such that love slumber, I sleep in most dreadfully late. Has been my undoing since childhood!—But that is unfortunate news regarding the tea party,” he added with a woe-begotten tone and expression.

“Truly regrettable,” Alice agreed with a look of blank helplessness. Then Mr. Dormas excused himself and scuttled out of the library. Alice took the pen and pad of paper.

“Lord, You have put me here for a reason. You’ve had me meet Deidre, this other ‘Alice,’ and I have no idea why. I feel super convicted about disillusioning her, as now I don’t know if she’ll get over it and go back to being a hope for these poor people, like Mr. Hatter and Mr. Dormas. What can I do?”

Alice’s eyes flashed and with an excited gasp, she started jotting down notes. She paused and flipped through the red volume.

“Yes!” she muttered having stopped at a page. “That’s it! Which verse? Let me see...”

Her gaze travelled down the page and she let out another gasp.

“Yes. Thank You, Lord! You have such wonderful answers...”



“Which suite are you from?”

“Room number 210.”

“You wish to speak to whom, Miss?”

“Alice.”

“If you mean Deidre Dudley, she is no longer ‘Alice,’ thank God. She’s finally come to her senses. If she keeps this up, I believe she could be discharged. She’s over there in the corner.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“By the way, Miss. Do you have permission to do this?”

“Most certainly,” said Alice. “You may check with Nurse Langley if you wish.”

Alice made her way over to where Deidre Dudley was sitting with her nose in a fashion magazine. A ripped charcoal grey tee and purple stretch jeans had now replaced her Victorian clothes. She looked blankly up at Alice through mascara-smudged eyelashes.

“Yeah?” she drawled through a lip-smacking mouth lined with black lip liner. “Want somethin’?”

“Alice?”

“Me? Was. Long gone, like, since this morning.”

“No, she’s not. Alice is not long gone.”

“Hey, I asked ya whaddaya want. Now give me some space.”

“I want to talk about the tea party.”

“What? That kiddie-corn concept? Forget it! Now get out of my face.”

“A lot of people are depending on it, Alice. They were so looking forward to it. ...”

“Let them look. Forwards, backwards, wherever. It ain’t happenin’. Now get off my case.”

Tears came to Alice’s eyes. She sent up a silent prayer.

“You know what, Alice?” she said finally.

“I said I ain’t Alice no more. Now get off my back...”

He lived in a world of fantasy... Alice doggedly began with a quivering lip.

“Hey! Cut me some slack...”

Regardless of Deidre’s objections, Alice continued.

Where all were mad but he.

He lived in a world of madness

Where he alone was free!

The girl’s eyes started to clear and she gave a start. “What? Where did you get that?”

“It’s in a book.”

“A red book?”

Alice nodded.

“It’s a poem about Don Quixote, right?”

Alice nodded again and continued,

Give me Alices and Don Quixotes—Alices ... plural—

Pied Pipers, Rasputins and MOs!

I’d rather have all of these doties

Than all of your world full of woes!

“So don’t you see, Deidre? It’s okay that there is more than one Alice. We need *more* Alices in the world, not just one. The world *needs* us! Isn’t that wonderful?”

“Of a truth it is!” said Deidre, jumping up and taking Alice’s arm.

So here’s to dear Alice’s Mad Hatter! she sang, and Alice joined in.
And the Walrus’ cabbages and kings!
So what if it’s mad, does it matter
If to children it happiness brings?

By now, the two Alices were waltzing arm in arm around the ward to the delight of the inmates and the chagrin of the nurse on duty.

So let’s sing a song for Quixote!
Let’s sing a song for the free!
Let’s sing a song though we’re dotey
For we’re bound for Eternity!

“So there *will* be a tea party, Miss Alice?” Mr. Dormas timidly inquired, having watched the last few minutes of their dance routine. “I must apologise, but I was taking a nap.”

“There most certainly will!” Deidre breathlessly announced. “At four o’clock sharp this afternoon. Kindly inform Mr. Hatter, and have Marcus O’Hare do the honours—he prepares the best brew. Now I must away and prepare myself.”

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THE TEA PARTY

Alice strolled outside where a table was set out under a tree, and Mr. Hatter and Marcus O’Hare, a thin-faced man with long pointed ears and wearing a brown fur coat, were ready to have tea. Mr. Dormas was sitting between them, only he was, as it seemed his usual practise, fast asleep.

The table was large, but the three were all crowded together in the middle of it.

“I am afraid it appears we have no room,” said Mr. Hatter.

“Nonsensical nonsense!” exclaimed Marcus O’Hare. “There’s plenty of room. Do join us, Alice.”

Alice timidly sat down at one of the only two other seats, a large armchair at one end of the table.

“That’s the head of the table, young lady,” said Mr. Hatter. “It’s reserved.”

“How do you know it’s the head of the table?” Marcus asked. “When there is an identical armchair at the other end?”

“It depends on who is sitting there,” said Mr. Hatter. “Anyway, young lady, tell me, why is a ghost like a vending machine?”

“I do so enjoy riddles!” said Alice. “I believe I can guess that.”

“Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?” said Marcus O’Hare.

“Exactly so,” said Alice.

“Then you should say what you mean.”

“I do,” Alice hastily replied. “At least ... at least, I mean what I say. That’s the same thing, I suppose.”

“You might just as well say,” added Mr. Dormas, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, “that ‘I breathe when I sleep’ is the same thing as ‘I sleep when I breathe.’”

“It may be the same thing with *you!*” said Mr. Hatter, and he flicked a little hot tea upon Mr. Dormas’ nose. Mr. Dormas shook his head and said, without opening his eyes, “Of course, of course—just what I was going to remark myself.”

“Have you guessed the riddle yet?” Mr. Hatter asked, turning back to Alice.

“No, I give up,” Alice replied. “What’s the answer?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” said Mr. Hatter.

“Nor I,” said Marcus O’Hare.

Alice sighed. “I think we might do something more fun with this time,” she said, “than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers.”

“Take some more tea,” Marcus O’Hare earnestly said to Alice.

“I’ve had nothing yet,” Alice replied with a grin, in an attempt to lighten the proceedings, “so I can’t take more.”

“You mean you can’t take less,” said Mr. Hatter. “It’s very easy to take more than nothing.”

Alice wrinkled her nose and forehead, deciphering the statement in her mind.

It’s easier to take more than nothing than less than nothing, she simply concluded.

An announcement from Mr. Hatter that “she’s finally here” interrupted Alice’s cogitation, and she sat up, happy and relieved at the arrival of Deidre Dudley. She admittedly looked beautiful. She had brushed her red-gold tresses to a lustre, and her blue pinafore dress appeared almost regal compared to Alice’s, which though freshly laundered, had borne the wear and tear of travel.

Mr. Hatter stood up and with a bow, pulled out the armchair at the other end of the table.

“I reserved the head of the table for your presence, Miss Alice,” he said.

“Nonsense!” said Deidre. “You have the true ‘original’ at the other end.”

“I would prefer,” said Alice, “to not go there, as my brother Brandon would say. In other words, I would rather we not discuss who the ‘real’ Alice is, and who it isn’t, et cetera, et cetera. I have it on good authority that the world needs many more ‘Alices,’ and even, if I may say so, mad hatters and march hares, and even Don Quixotes. ...”

Just then, a clattering in the courtyard disturbed the company at the table. Alice and Deidre jumped up, Mr. Dormas remained asleep, and the others remained seated.

“Well, speak of the Devil and he comes around!” Mr. Hatter remarked at the sight of two police officers forcibly leading a tall, bony, elderly gentleman wearing a grey goatee and a rusted suit of armour into the hospital.

“Outstandingly outstanding,” said Marcus O’Hare. “Old Don himself.”

“It *is!*” Alice and Deidre excitedly chorused.

“But I wouldn’t say Don Quixote is the Devil,” said Alice.

“It’s merely a figure of speech,” Mr. Dormas murmured in his sleep, “that is traditionally said whenever someone whom you have just been talking about uncannily shows up.”

“So what do we do, Alice?” Deidre whispered, drawing her aside to another tree as if into conference.

“I suggest,” said Alice, after a short silent prayer for direction, “that you continue with the tea party, making it as engaging and fun for all as possible, while I investigate this sudden turn of events regarding Mr. Quixote. Maybe I can even persuade him to join us here at the table.”

“That would be ever so much fun! But do you think it’s possible that he really *is* Don Quixote?”

Alice smiled. “Of course. About as possible as you or I really being Alice.”

“Well, best wishes, dear friend.”

Surprising herself with her boldness, Alice marched up to the police officers who had now been joined by a couple of burly male orderlies in the reception area, and found herself demanding an explanation of their seeming rough treatment of Mr. Quixote.

“He’s checking in, little lady,” said one of the officers. “Firstly he’s driven a rusted old rattletrap across the border with no license plates or papers. ...”

“‘A rusted old rattletrap,’ he calls it?” bellowed Don Quixote in a voice that reminded Alice of Grandpa on some old recordings, only with a pro-

nounced Spanish accent. "Is that how one refers to my trusty steed? She hath borne me along on many adventures. ..."

"And secondly," continued the officer, "he transported an illegal alien, a Mexican, across the border without a visa."

"Señor Sancho Panza is my faithful squire," Quixote said to Alice. "There is nothing illegal about him, Miss ... I don't believe I caught your name."

"Alice," she said, and delighted his woeful countenance with a curtsy.

"Ah, forgive me. I am dreadfully sorry," he said, and knelt and kissed her hand. "I should have known. *Queen* Alice herself. No knight-errant could wish for a worthier liege."

Alice was about to protest, but then remembered her coronation at the Christmas Eve gathering of the cards.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

"And they have bound thee in this prison also, Your Majesty?"

"This is not a prison, Mr. Quixote," said one of the orderlies. "It's a mental wellness resort."

"Then pardon me, dear sirs," said Alice, "but I hardly think that driving what you term a 'rattletrap,' or travelling with a person without a visa, merit detention in such a place."

"It isn't detention," snapped the orderly. "It's a vacation."

"But that wasn't all, Missy," the police officer interjected. "Thirdly, Mr. Quixote was found in the middle of an oilfield challenging a drilling apparatus to battle. He was saying that the black demon it's bringing up from the earth is causing bloodshed around the world."

"That's the truth, my man!" said Don Quixote.

The other police officer tapped his head as he looked at Alice. "See? Cuckoo, if you ask me."

"I don't know," said Alice. "He could have a point about the oil."

"Then you're in good company, Miss," said an orderly. "Since working here, I have come to the conclusion that not only great minds think alike but unstable ones also. So if you'll excuse us, we'll have Mr. Quixote checked in at reception."

"Once he is, sir," said Alice, "please let him know that he is invited to Mr. Hatter's tea party out on the lawn under the tree in front of the gymnasium."

"I don't know about that," said the orderly.

"Then I must take this up with the management," said Alice, stepping up to the desk and addressing the receptionist. "The intercom, please?"

"That won't be necessary, Miss," the orderly hastily said with a feeble smile. "I'm sure once Mr. Quixote is settled in his suite he would be

available to attend. It's merely procedure, you know. Can take a little time."

"I understand perfectly, sir," said Alice before excusing herself with a curtsy.

Alice decided to take a detour on her way back to the tea party in order to explore the premises a little without restrictive supervision. Ignoring a sign that read "authorised personnel only," she started down one darkened corridor until she heard wails, screams, and thumping coming from behind a door of a ward at the end.

She stopped in her tracks and turned to run back out to the garden. A pair of hands clamped down on her shoulders.

"Oh, and where do you think *you* were headed?"

"Ou-outside," Alice gasped in the face of a big-boned, pale-skinned female nurse with piercing, steel grey eyes.

"Can't you read?" she demanded, pointing at the sign.

"Umm..."

"What did curiosity do, young lady?" the woman hissed.

"K-killed the ... er ... c-cat, I believe, ma'am."

The woman let out an echoing cackle that Alice recognised from somewhere, but could not place it. "Killed the proverbial cat! Yes, yes, yes! What makes you think you will fare any better, my little kitten?"

"M-my faith, I s-suppose," said Alice. "And the power of the keys."

"Have you been reading that accursed red book?"

"I d-don't know what you mean."

"Playing dumb will get you everywhere with me, young lady. In the pigpen, the doghouse, the nuthouse, and possibly solitary confinement. Now, did you think you would come down here and practise your 'deliverance' in this section of the 'facility'?"

"I am unaware that I have been doing such, ma'am."

"Unaware? I see. So you're the unsuspecting tool of a greater power. Well, it won't work here, you can see for yourself."

The woman grabbed Alice's arm and yanked her along the corridor towards the ward from where shrieks, wails, and pounding on the walls emitted. Alice furtively reached into her pinafore pocket for the ring of keys.

"Ah!" said the woman, grabbing it from her hand. "I know what this is—don't think that you can..."

She suddenly let out a shriek, threw the keys onto the floor and clutched her hand in pain.

"Y-you burned my hand!"

Alice picked up the keys and dashed out of the building.

TO CAP IT OFF

You look as if you've seen a ghost," Mr. Hatter remarked upon seeing Alice return to the tea party table breathless and trembling.

"Well, I did have the misfortune to meet a rather frightening nurse," Alice panted.

"Don't contradict. I said you look *as if* you'd seen a ghost—I never said that you *had* seen one."

"I beg your pardon, sir. But I wasn't contradicting."

"There you go, contradicting."

"She contradicted, did she not?" Mr. Hatter asked the rest of the table (or more precisely, the guests at the table).

"Contradicted..." Marcus said, and reaching into his vest pocket, pulled out a small well-worn book and leafed through its pages. "Let me see ... contradict ... disagree with, oppose, counter ... I suppose you could say that she *countered* your remark. ..."

"May I join you guys?"

The tea party gathering was startled at seeing Nurse Faye Langley standing holding a plate of sweet rolls and a cup of coffee.

"Certainly, ma'am," said Alice with a glance at the others for approval. Most smiled, although with an air of uncertainty.

"I am not a huge fan of tea," said Faye, looking around for a chair. "So I brought my own brew. Hope you don't mind."

"Of course not, ma'am," said Alice.

"Are we in trouble?" Deidre asked.

"No, no, no. Far from it. I was eatin' my mid-afternoon snack with some of the staff, and as usual, their conversation became so deadly borin'. The women were fussin' about fashions, fitness, fads, and food phobias, and the men were discussin' sports, abs, and politics. I looked out into the garden, and well ... it seems y'all were havin' a much more interestin' time."

"We were," said Mr. Hatter. "Absolutely tremendous. Mr. O'Hare was telling us about the rise and fall of his March hair salon chain in New York."

"I couldn't quite *cut* it," said Marcus. "Pardon the pun."

"It seems like styles changed and he lost a lot of *fringe* benefits," said Mr. Hatter with a chuckle that no one but Alice seconded.

"Very clever!" she said. "I love puns. Brandon is ever so good at them."

“That was my speciality,” said Mr. O’Hare. “Fringes, not puns. Or as you say here in the U.S., *bangs*.”

“So I presume you went out with one,” Deidre cautiously remarked with a wary grin.

To her relief, the table (or more precisely, the guests at the table) erupted into laughter.

“You’re catching on, dear,” said Nurse Langley, who had made herself comfortable by pulling up a deckchair.

“Very well,” Marcus O’Hare said glumly. “Go ahead, everyone, I don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind what, sir?” Alice asked.

“Them having a laugh and punning at the expense of my failure.”

The whole table (or more precisely, the guests at the table) fell uncomfortably silent.

“What do you mean, Marcus?” murmured Mr. Dormas with his head nodding on his breast. “If I heard correctly, it was you who started out with a pun.”

“Maybe so,” said Marcus. “But I mean it. Go ahead. I’m used to it.”

“Used to what?” Faye Langley gingerly inquired.

“Derision, criticism ... let me see”—Marcus paused and leafed through his little book—“malignment, ridicule, scorn, contempt, disdain...”

“Is that a thesaurus, sir?” Alice asked.

“It most certainly is,” said Marcus. “Why?”

“Brandon uses an online one a lot when he writes. He says it’s a cool tool.”

“Humph. I use it to broaden my British language base.”

“You mean *English* language base?” said Faye.

“I meant nothing of the sort, ma’am. When one says ‘I speak English,’ it has an entirely different connotation than when one says ‘I speak British.’”

“Look,” said Alice. “I am sure we all feel much burdened about Mr. O’Hare’s trials, but...”

“Feel much *what* about his *what*?”

“You know, concerned about his troubles. But maybe we should move on with more appropriate tea party conversation and keep it on the...”

“Upswing?” Deidre suggested.

Alice nodded, and the rest of the table (or to be more precise, the rest of the guests at the table) wholeheartedly concurred. Deidre continued.

“So unless anyone else wishes to discuss their tale of woe, I move that we...”

“I do,” said Mr. Hatter.

“Do what?”

“Wish to discuss my tale of woe. If you don’t mind, Alice, but I took exception to Mr. O’Hare’s insinuation that we were punning and laughing at the expense of his ... er ... demise.”

“Very well,” said Deidre. “Then what do you wish to discuss?”

“The rise and fall of my hattery.”

“Your what?”

“My hat business.”

Deidre looked around at the others and shrugged. “I suppose we can proceed, unless there are any objections?”

The whole table nodded, which shook the cups and plates and silverware.

“Oh my goodness,” said Nurse Langley. “It’s an *earthquake*.”

“I believe not,” said Marcus. “For it seems the table itself is in agreement with us that we allow Mr. Hatter to speak about his own demise. ... Let me see. ...”

He reached into the breast pocket of his suit. “Failure, ruin, downfall, collapse...”

Alice was anxious to keep things moving and positive, but noticed that the rest of the guests were always quite content to stop and listen whenever Marcus O’Hare read aloud the numerous synonyms of a chosen—and so far, it seemed, rather negative—word.

“I find it fascinating,” whispered Deidre, noticing Alice’s impatience.

“I suppose it is quite,” said Alice. “I do learn a lot.”

“Ah ... I presume ‘demise’ will have to suffice,” Marcus said at last with a long sigh.

“So, Mr. Hatter?” said Deidre. “The floor is yours.”

“If I may point out, Miss,” said Marcus. “There is no floor here, only grass.”

“Very well, Mr. Hatter. The grass is yours.”

Mr. Hatter stood up, cleared his throat, pulled up his socks, adjusted his top hat, straightened his cravat and the handkerchief in his breast pocket, aligned the crease in his trousers, pulled out his shirt cuffs to expose his monogrammed gold cufflinks, and paused to consider any other needed preparation before beginning.

“I, Amos Hatter, was—as you all may remember—the very wealthy owner of a successful chain of hat stores, inherited from my father Samuel Hatter, my grandfather Nathan Hatter, my great grandfather Malachi Hatter, and my great great grandfather Ishmael Hatter...”

“Sadly,” he said finally, having listed almost a dozen generations of the Hatter genealogy before losing track, “the bottom and the top, and everything in between fell out of the business with...” He pulled out the handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his eyes.

With what? was the table’s—along with its guests’—unheard but perceptible question.

“—with that blight upon the head of every American male and female, that bane of headwear that has gained unmerited yet unquestioned acceptability in all forms of society from the President himself down to the lowest class of gangsta rapper. ...”

“I know!” Alice exclaimed. “Brandon has one, and he wears it backwards. ...”

“It has ruthlessly replaced the dignified Derby (also known as the British Bowler),” Mr. Hatter continued, “along with the famed Fedora, the honoured Homburg, the prestigious Panama, the stately Stetson and even the traditional Trilby. Ladies and gentlemen, I refer to...”

“The baseball cap!” chorused the guests while the table stood stoic.

“Right,” said Mr. Hatter. “The awful ... Mr. O’Hare, any more appropriate adjectives?”

“Certainly, Mr. Hatter,” Marcus said, opening his thesaurus. “Terrible, dreadful, appalling, abysmal...”

“Ah, yes,” said Mr. Hatter. “*Abysmal* baseball cap. Friends, relatives, accountants, bankers, and even the local rabbi (all wearing baseball caps, mind you), advised me to go into the baseball cap business, saying that with my knowledge of heads and hattery, I would take the market by storm. However, I could not abide the idea of shaming the family name by prostituting my hattery to flattery, and so I temporarily went into the boutique business with the resurgent interest in Victorian women’s fashion. A fashion, may I add, brought about by dear Alice here.”

He pointed to Deidre, who shook her head.

“Not me,” she said.

“No? Were you not the ice-skating Alice that the public thought was barmy?”

“Nothing of the sort, Mr. Hatter!”

“Anyway,” Mr. Hatter continued, “with that fad yielding its temporary tenure to Charlotte Ann Gothic, I was soon out of business and the name of Mad Hatter hatteries is now history.”

Having said this, Mr. Hatter sat down and buried his face in his hands. Suddenly, at the sensation of a comforting hand on his shoulder, he lifted and turned his head to see Don Quixote standing behind him.

“Your life’s work is far from over, Señor,” said the beaming old knight. “In fact, I would ask thee to fashion for me the finest helmet you have ever made. I will pay thee handsomely.”

“Helmet? I’ve never worked with helmets.”

“Nonsense, man! The very helmet thou wearest even now is a fine work of craftsmanship! By thine own hand, I assume?”

“Why yes, of course. The blocking was artful and the shaping exquisite, a pride of mine, even if I say so myself.”

“Let another man praise thee and not thine own lips!” Quixote said sternly, then his wizened countenance softened and his eyes twinkled. “Even so, I shall be that ‘other man.’ I see by thine own helmet that thou art more than the man for the job. Thou shalt start at six-thirty sharp in the morning, and I expect the first fitting by four o’clock in the afternoon.”

“B-but besides a tape measure, I have no materials, fabric or tools, good knight.”

“I think we can rustle sump’n up,” Nurse Langley said hastily. “It’s obviously a matter of major importance.”

“And what style, may I ask, milord?” said Mr. Hatter.

“Style? This is not a matter of *style*. It’s a matter of the fray!”

“I understand,” said Mr. Hatter. “I merely require a ... how shall I put it ... a mock-up?”

“Mock-up?” bellowed Quixote. “This is no laughing matter.”

“There are many alternatives,” Marcus interjected, pulling out his little book. “Replica, mould, facsimile, model...”

“Model, yes, that’s it,” said Mr. Hatter.

“Nay,” said Don Quixote. “‘Model’ implies fashion.”

“Try ‘replica,’” said Marcus.

“Very well,” said Quixote, surveying the grounds. His eyes landed on a gardener who was watering the lawn quite a few metres away. “*There ... a noble piece of battle headwear fit for such a valiant knight of the realm, if I ever saw one.*”

“Who do you mean, milord?”

“The gardener, Mr. Hatter,” Faye said.

“Who, *him*? Why, he’s wearing a baseball...”

“I realise that, Mr. Hatter,” Faye said in a low voice. “However, it would be discreet to comply with Señor Quixote’s wishes.”

Mr. Hatter looked over at Deidre with an expression that seemed to denote a seeking for approval.

She nodded. “Yes, Mr. Hatter, it’s a noble cause.”

“Very well...,” Mr. Hatter began, but Don Quixote was already marching over to the gardener. After a brief conversation, Quixote

returned with the man's baseball cap. He placed it reverently before Mr. Hatter's eyes (which were now bulging out of their sockets).

"A helmet befitting an honourable knight of servitude," said Quixote, pointing to the gardener who was observing the party at the table and scratching his shaking head. "I have seen servants walking as princes and princes walking as servants upon the earth."

Mr. Hatter swallowed hard and nodded. "I j-just have to take your measurements, sir."

As Don Quixote sat down and Mr. Hatter produced his measuring tape, the steel-eyed nurse who Alice had encountered in the restricted wing marched up flanked by the two burly orderlies.

"Is this the woman you met, Alice?" Deidre whispered.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"That's the Head Nurse. Ulva Zauber. Bad news, indeed."

"Sorry to interrupt this festive occasion," said the woman. "Alice, come with us, please."

"Why, ma'am?"

"We are offering you an upgrade," the nurse said, and the two orderlies took Alice by the arms.

"An upgrade, Nurse Zauber?" Faye inquired.

"Yes, Nurse Langley. Miss Pleasance will now have more privacy and quiet."

"Sounds wonderful," said Mr. Dormas, sleepily.

"Why? Her present quarters are not good enough?"

"It is not so much her quarters that has merited this upgrade, Nurse Langley, but the necessity for safeguards against unwarranted demands on Miss Pleasance's time and attention."

"But will she still have contact with the other guests?"

"We have arranged it so that she is disturbed only by qualified and authorised personnel. It's all in her best interests."

We're only thinking of her! Don Quixote sang with a laugh.

"That's inappropriate, Mister," said Nurse Zauber. "And if I were you, I would keep your personal sentiments to yourself."

"I have, Señora. There has been much that I have wished to express on the travesty of this that I have kept bitterly stuffed in my gut, if thou wouldst pardon my unseemly expression."

"Mr. Quixote, let me remind you of something. ..."

"Art thou pulling out the mirrors, Señora?"

"The mirrors?"

"Yes, Miss Enchantress. Art thou attempting to show ourselves to ourselves and thereby give us a...?"

“Wakeup call?” interjected Deidre.

“If that’s what you want to call it, Miss Dudley. Yes.”

“Then in that case...” Deidre began singing, and Alice and Don Quixote joined in.

*Oh give me a world of madness
If madness is to be glad!
I’d rather be happy in madness
Than only be sane and sad.
This world full of violence and madness
So violent and mad and insane!
Would you rather my joy, or their sadness?
Would you rather my bliss, or their pain?
So let me dream on if I’m dreaming!
Oh let me drift on in my dreams!
I’d rather be dreaming than screaming!
I’d rather have dreams than their screams!*

“I don’t know what you lunatics are raving on about,” said Nurse Zauber, “but my duty here at Buena Vista is to bring you all as quickly as possible to a short sharp...”

“Electric shock reality check?” asked Deidre.

“I find your facetiousness non-amusing, Miss Dudley, but yes, if all else fails, including three hundred channels of mind-adjusting TV fare, then electrical stimulation and even behavioural modifying lobotomy may be in order.”

“Oh, please don’t resort to that, Nurse Zauber,” said Faye.

“You are a member of the staff here, Nurse Langley, and this is what fraternising at a tea party with the guests brings you to? Partaking of their demons?”

“If I may say so,” said Faye, “Alice and this tea party have brought me more happy stimulation than all the faculty coffee break chitchat has in months.”

“So you want to be committed, Nurse Langley?” said Ulva. “Join them. Fill in the form. Two hundred a night for a basic single with bathroom, remember. Excellent room service. Anyway, Miss Pleasance, do you have any other belongings in your present suite?”

“Not much,” said Alice. “Just a few toiletries and...”

“I can rustle ’em up,” said Faye, “and bring them to her.”

“Fine. Now let’s get on with it.”

To be continued...

HEAVEN'S
LIBRARY

Issue 234

Apparently Alice

Part Five



The story so far: Alice has been committed to the Buena Vista Mental Wellness Spa, and has begun bringing cheer and meaning to the lives of some of the other residents and care personnel. After a tea party she and her alter ego, Miss Deirdre Dudley, hosted, Alice discovered that her accommodations were being “upgraded” by Nurse Zauber, a rather unsympathetic character Alice found rather suspicious.

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“UPGRADED”

Ulva Zauber made a sweeping gesture at the spacious and lavishly furnished suite, which included a ceiling-high exercise apparatus, a video centre, a large bathroom, a kitchenette, and a minibar.

“And you have unlimited wireless access,” Ulva said, pointing to a computer.

“Oh, my goodness. I don’t get that at home.”

“And why not?”

“Well, our online time is somewhat regulated.”

“Shame. So, Miss Pleasance, is not this upgrade more suited to your needs and taste?”

“To be sure, the accommodations are more than adequate, ma’am. ... And taste? *Maybe*,” she timidly added, seeing that mirrors covered most of the walls, ceiling, and even between the carpeting on the floors.

Alice giggled. “It’s like a hall of mirrors, ma’am. And some of them *do* look a little distorted.”

“Unusual that you noticed that, child. I mean ... Miss Pleasance. It’s actually part of our ‘reality verification’ program, where a certain manipulation of the guest’s perception is in order. Those challenged with AERS for instance, have benefited greatly from facing themselves. Poor Miss Dudley would be miles ahead if she would comply with those who only have her interests at heart. However, due to her low self-esteem, she avoids mirrors like the plague. That’s why I’m so glad that you have cooperated.”

HL: Note that all parts of this story use British spelling.

Art by Jeremy; shades by Sabine

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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“Actually, ma’am, mirrors have been a weakness for me in the past. I had to have prayer against vanity. Brandon used to say that not only could I never pass one up, but I would take it home if I could!”

“Nothing wrong with that, dear girl! I am a mirror aficionado myself.”

“Anyway, I’m glad the walls aren’t padded in this suite,” said Alice. “Made me feel too much like a genuine nutcase!”

“We see no need for acoustic insulation in our upgraded suites,” Ulva said crisply.

“And I do love French windows,” Alice remarked, seeing that the view from the balcony overlooked the city’s greener university district on the west side. “And there’s even a swimming pool.”

“There *is*, Miss.” Ulva lowered her voice. “And, by the way, since Operation Iraqi Freedom, we no longer have *French* windows here at Buena Vista. We replaced them all with *Freedom* windows. However, they will remain locked until certain requirements are fulfilled.”

Alice gave a puzzled frown and shrugged. “I am unsure as to my requirements, ma’am.”

“Ah ... maybe it’s time for some negotiation,” Ulva said as she dismissed the orderlies with a wave.

“Who, may I ask, is paying for all this?” Alice inquired once they were alone.

“I have arranged it so that should you and I arrive at an agreement,” Ulva replied as she sauntered over to the minibar, “we at Buena Vista would cover all expenses.”

Once she had selected a small bottle of gin and a can of tonic water, Ulva settled into a couch with a glass and beckoned Alice to draw closer. She placed a hand on Alice’s arm and smiled. “Before we start, I want to apologise for my rather hasty, and dare I say brusque, manner there in the honorary guest wing. I am sure you understand.”

“Well, I suppose I *was* breaking the rules, ma’am. I apologise.”

“Ah, sweet child. You will be pleased to note that here at Buena Vista there is no such thing as breaking rules, as we have none.”

“No rules, ma’am?”

Ulva shook her head. “We merely have guidelines to observe. It’s part of our relaxed and open-minded policy.”

“That’s good, ma’am,” said Alice with a grim expression. “I’m certainly not one for a bunch of rules and stuff. It bugs me. Especially in a large Home, it can, like, turn ... *institutionalised*, as Brandon would say.”

“Couldn’t agree with him more, Miss Pleasance. However, I would like to point out that we at Buena Vista regard our facility as far from being an institution.”

“Upon my word, I was insinuating no such thing, ma’am,” said Alice.

Taking a sip from her glass, Ulva reclined in the couch. "I am sure you weren't, Miss Pleasance. Again, I do want to apologise for my rather brusque manner back there in the honorary guest wing. The pressure of the responsibility, you know..."

She faltered, and sniffing, reached for a tissue box on the coffee table. "It can turn even the gentlest of human beings into a m-monster. Can you understand that?"

Alice nodded sympathetically. "I think so, ma'am. That's what Grandpa said in 'Prayer for Love and Mercy' about nurses having to bear the sight of so much suffering. They have to..."

"Harden themselves," said Ulva, wiping her eyes.

"That's encouraging," said Alice. "You know the..."

"Principle at least," said Ulva. "Look, Miss ... er ... Do you mind if I call you Alice?"

"Not at all, ma'am."

"So, Alice, would you like a drink?"

"I wouldn't mind a juice."

"I was thinking of something a little more exotic. I'm having a gin and tonic."

"Mummy likes those," said Alice. "But I'm too young for it according to the *Charter*."

"Too young?"

"Yes, ma'am. Not until I am eighteen."

Ulva slapped her head and looked aghast. "Alice Pleasance! I thought you were at *least* that! Of course, appearances *can* be deceiving. It must be that air of maturity and wisdom."

Alice smiled bashfully. "Well, thank you, ma'am. It's really only the..."

"So, it's a *rule*?" Ulva asked. "Not being able to enjoy a simple pleasure such as this?"

Alice nodded. Ulva winked and rose from the chair.

"Leave it to me," she said and walked back to the minibar, where she carefully mixed another concoction. "Here at Buena Vista we only have guidelines, remember?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Which we agreed is better than having rules or even regulations, right?"

"Er ... yes, ma'am. At least guidelines *sounds* better."

"Here." Ulva handed Alice a tall, brimming glass. "It's called a white panther. Ever tried it?"

"N-no."

"Don't worry, it's non-alcoholic. It's a high-energy drink."

"I don't usually drink any of those," said Alice. "My parents are strict about it."

Ulva cackled and then collected herself seeing that her reaction unnerved Alice. She softened her voice.

“Anyway, enjoy. You deserve a little freedom to experiment.”

The nurse slumped into the largest couch and watched Alice cautiously sip at the silver grey brew. “So, what do you think of my electrolyte energy punch?”

Alice smiled approvingly. “Delicious, ma’am.”

Alice was about to take another sip when she shrieked and sprang to her feet. She pulled the key ring out of her pocket and threw it down where it began to burn a hole in the rug.

“Why can’t I, like, do what I *want* and have some *fun* sometimes?” Alice wailed.

“Calm down, Alice, calm down,” said Ulva. She gingerly picked up the smouldering key ring. “No problem. Let’s cool this ... er ... *trinket* off in the sink. I’ll call room service to replace the rug.”

Alice sat back down on the couch and blankly sipped her drink. Ulva returned and settled beside her. “So where were we before being so rudely interrupted by your little keepsake?”

Alice shrugged. “Rules, I guess.”

“Ah, yes ... rules. I noticed in your ... umm ... *outburst* that you mentioned something about not having fun?”

“Maybe,” Alice said morosely and Ulva placed a hand on hers.

“I understand that it came out in a moment of stress, dear Alice. But want to talk about it? Remember that our undertaking here at Buena Vista is to assist our guests in achieving optimum mind wellness, shedding excess psychological baggage, and finding closure. We only have your best interests at heart.”

“It’s not like I don’t have fun, nurse,” said Alice after taking a long swallow of her drink. “It’s cool having these awesome adventures and stuff. I just get mega miffed at having to dress like this, talk posh, and stuff. It’s like I can’t *relate*.”

“I understand perfectly, Alice.”

“Other than that, well, hey, it’s *fun*.”

Ulva cackled and slapped Alice’s back. “Seems like you’ve tackled the speech issue, though. Congrats.”

“Hey! I have, haven’t I? Thank You, Lord!”

“Now let’s give credit where it’s due, Alice. If it wasn’t for me at first being cruel to be kind, as the saying goes, in upgrading you, you would have still been down there championing your out-of-time crusade. Acute Era Reversal Syndrome is a hard one to kick.”

“I guess you’re right,” said Alice, staring at the floor, “but what about these uncool duds and stuff?”

Ulva winked and pointed to the back of the room. “Take a look in there.”

Alice took another sip and walked over to a walk-in closet. She switched on the light and gasped.

“Wow! Such neat stuff. And all my size?”

Ulva nodded. “And to your taste?”

“Is it *ever!* Bell-bottoms, boots and belts, bright blouses, tees—cooler than anything I’ve worn at home ... but...” Alice’s face dropped. “I don’t think you realise.”

Ulva winked again. “No *Alice and the Cards* magic tricks here, babe. Go for it.”

Alice cautiously undressed, stepped into a choice pair of sequined, embroidered bell-bottom jeans, and held her breath.

“Wow! Cool,” she said and exhaled. “Nothing happened.”

Ulva glanced at her watch and rose from her seat. “Oopsie. Need to get going. Responsibility affords no time for oneself. But it’s been a pleasure getting to know you, Alice. Have fun dressing up. It’s all yours.”

“Wow, thanks. This is like, *awesome!* Never had so many cool clothes in all my life.”

“Wonderful. If you have any problem coordinating or anything, there are piles of fashion magazines over in that corner to help with ideas. ...”

The nurse paused to look Alice over. “Be sure to make good use of the Flexit, by the way.”

“*Flexit?*”

“The workout equipment. And there’s a stack of fitness magazines with some effective methods for trimming down.”

Alice blushed. “Do you think I need...?”

The nurse waved her hand and chuckled as she made her way to the door. “I’m sure you’ll do just great. Soon I expect to see a *new* Alice. Oh, and by the way, the TV has three hundred channels of premium mental wellness programming. Enjoy.”

Ulva pecked Alice on the cheek and left the overjoyed girl to ransack the walk-in closet. A blissful three hours ensued for Alice as she primped and preened around the suite in assorted combinations of clothes and admired herself in the surrounding mirrors.

I wish Rummy could see me now—he’d die for me! she concluded after spending almost an hour applying makeup according to tips in a fashion magazine. With a wistful sigh and a white panther in hand, she settled into the couch in front of the TV and clicked the remote controls. Eventually, the widescreen flickered to life and the stereo centre boomed with canned*

* **canned:** prerecorded for general use, rather than for a specific broadcast or performance

audience cackle. It was a comedy show called *Chums*, starring a young couple who seemed to spend most of their time in a typical American living room.

Karen: Hey Steve, didya know that you're drop-dead ugly?

(Cackle.)

Steve: Beauty's in the eye of the beholder, babe!

(Cackle.)

Karen: Ya, Steve, and it's drop-dead ugly fools who say that!

(Cackle.)

Steve: So you don't believe in inner beauty?

(Cackle.)

Karen: Na. I try to avoid it.

After a few more scenes of the couple and a few of their friends engaged in crude and sarcastic banter, Alice sat puzzled, unable to see the humour in most of the lines. As *Brandon says, the fellow on the laugh-over machine must have been trigger-happy*, she concluded and switched the channel to a stadium crowd roaring at padded hulks barging into each other while tossing and kicking a ball.

Alice groaned and switched the channel. This time, it was to a talk show with an aged and dryly sarcastic host verbally humiliating a pretty but unsuspecting starlet. Alice shook her head and flipped the channels through weather updates, advertisements, news programmes, crime reports, cartoons, shoot 'em ups, sports, music fare, and documentaries, until she settled for a high school romantic comedy that proved innocuous enough to allow her thoughts to wander.

Nurse Zauber actually seems quite sweet after all, Alice mused. Even with her strange preoccupation with mirrors. It is rather disconcerting sitting on the toilet and seeing yourself from all angles. ... Maybe I should seriously look into that workout program?

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STUFF...

Throughout the next couple of days, while snacking and taking advantage of sumptuous room service fare, Alice read magazines, flipped TV channels, and browsed the Internet, until around the late afternoon of the second day, concerned about weight gain, she chose a fashionable workout suit and huffed and puffed herself through her paces on the Flexit.

Two hours later, she had taken a shower and was drying herself off when she suddenly noticed the ring of keys in the bathroom sink. Wondering why she hadn't spotted them when she had cleaned her teeth and splashed her face in the mornings, she picked them up. They appeared tarnished, and the beautifully inscribed names were gone. With an air of sadness, she dropped them into the pocket of her pinafore dress that was hanging in the walk-in closet and chose another set of clothes. Her room doorbell rang; it was Nurse Ulva Zauber.

"Don't mean to intrude, Miss Pleasance ... Alice. But I suddenly realised that I hadn't checked on you for the past couple of days. I trust you've kept yourself occupied?"

"I have. It's cool, thanks."

"Good. I have been making sure, of course, that the room service has been up to par."

Alice shrugged. "It's great."

"And *you* look great," said Ulva. "Nice choice of duds and tasty makeup job. You'll knock your Romeos dead. You sure must have a few."

Alice blushed. "Romeos? Ya, kind of. Only Betty Trucker's son at the moment."

"Betty Trucker?"

"You wouldn't know her. But she's cool and stuff. She's probably worried stiff about me right now, though."

"If you have her contact details, we can let her know that you're okay."

Alice sighed. "I don't. All I know is that she's a member of the Lonely Highway Trucker's Union."

"We'll look into it, Alice, 'cos the good news is that from the looks of things, you could be, er ... released sooner than expected."

"Really? Just when I'm beginning to like it here and stuff?"

"Don't worry—it wouldn't be for at least a couple of months."

"Well, I wasn't thinking quite *that* long," said Alice.

Ulva shrugged apologetically. "I'm afraid so. We'll still have to perform various brain scans and tests after your period of rehabilitation."

"Rehabilitation? When does *that* begin?"

"*Did*, Miss Pleasance. A couple of days ago. Look around. This *is* your rehabilitation."

Alice grinned and shook her head in amazement.

"Not too bad, is it?" said Ulva.

"It *is* kind of cool and stuff," said Alice, "but..."

“Look, if there’s anything I can do, just say the word and it’s ‘open sesame.’”

“Actually, I would ever so very much enjoy the swimming pool, ma’am, but alas and alack ... oh my gosh!”

Alice put a hand to her mouth and Ulva put one on her shoulder. “It’s okay, it’s okay, honey. You will have relapses, that’s understandable. As I said, AERS is a tough customer to shake. That’s why...”

Ulva paused and walked over to the minibar. “Mind if I indulge as I propose an idea to you?”

Alice shook her head.

“Want another white panther?”

Alice shrugged. “Whatever is cool.”

“To get to the point, Alice, I would like you to have some ‘touch base’ time with Deidre Dudley.”

“Hey, I’d *love* to. It does get kind of lonely here and stuff, and she’s cool.”

“Er ... yes. However, Deidre Dudley, or another ‘Alice’ as she believes she is, is having a deleterious effect on the guests, *and* the staff, I may add. Once you showed up, she was beginning to come to her senses and was about to be released, then apparently, Alice, you yourself turned her head back to her delusion.”

Alice took a swallow from her glass and smiled weakly. “This drink is okay.”

“Isn’t that right?”

“I ... er ... *guess*,” said Alice. “But I understood that you wanted your patients...”

“Guests.”

“Yah, guests. I understood that you wanted them to stay indefinitely and stuff, ‘cos...”

“Deidre Dudley was on our budget assignment program, Miss Pleasance. The parent or guardian pays a flat fee for successful services rendered. Consequently, we try to finish the job—for want of a better word—ASAP, especially during peak season. Other guests pay a substantial monthly rate for us to keep them until we’ve certified them as being in a state of optimum mental wellness.

“Naturally, and I’m taking you into the strictest confidence here, Miss Pleasance—Alice—these are the ones who stay here the longest.”

“Naturally,” said Alice, forcing a grin.

“Then there are others like Mr. Hatter and Mr. O’Hare for instance, who from their own pocket, *pay* to live here. It’s become their home. Marcus is rich and has been a guest here for the last five or six years. He has no desire to leave, and we respect that.”

“And me?” Alice asked.

“On the house, so to speak!” said Ulva with another cackle, causing Alice to look furtively about the room. “I don’t mean to disturb you, Alice, but you’re an extremely influential guest. That’s why the Buena Vista staff would very much like Deidre Dudley to see you and benefit from your *progress*.”

Alice lowered her head and shut her eyes. Ulva sniffed.

“What’s that burning?”

“Oh no!” shrieked Alice, dashing to the walk-in closet. Smoke and flames coming from the pocket of her pinafore dress had set off the fire alarms.

“What happened, child?”

“I was just praying and stuff...”

“*Praying?*”

Just then, the door opened; a member of the security staff had let himself in.

“The source of the alarm is in here, madam?” he said.

“I believe so,” said Ulva, slyly observing Alice frantically dousing her dress in the kitchen sink. “But it’s all under control. *False* alarm, shall we say?”

“We shall,” said the guard with a tip of his hat. “We shall. Goodnight, ma’am, and goodnight, Miss.”

Alice turned and curtseyed.

“Damn it, child!” Ulva shrieked once the guard had left. “You could have burned the whole facility down. I should have flushed that damn trinket down the toilet when I had the chance.”

“And possibly stood an even greater chance of burning it down,” Alice retorted. “Look, I don’t know what...”

“I do, Miss Pleasance.” Ulva softened her voice. “Sorry, Alice, it’s been a tense day. Tell me, honey, do you like it here?”

Alice sighed and nodded.

“And all these clothes and the new look?”

“Of course. But I *am* missing home and stuff.”

“Naturally,” said Ulva. “So, do you want to go home early?”

“Yah.”

“Then encourage Deidre Dudley to comply with normalcy as you have done. Snap her out of her delusion, and you’ll both be walking out of here scot-free.

“And I think,” Ulva continued, unlocking the French windows, “that seeing how well you’re responding to therapy, we can make the patio and the pool available.”

“Wow! That’s great. Thanks.”

“Maybe you’ll want to invite Deidre for a midnight dip. Let her pick a cool swimsuit.”

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...AND MORE STUFF

Come in,” Alice said, responding to a timid knock. Deidre Dudley cautiously poked her head around the door and her face dropped.

“N-Nurse Zauber sent me up,” she said, stepping forward to hug Alice, who hastily reciprocated then backed away to adjust her hair in the mirror.

“I know. She thought it’d be cool for us to touch base and stuff. It was getting a tad lonely here, but there’s tons of cool perks and stuff.”

“I can s-see that, Alice. But wh-what happened to *you*?”

“Nothing. Just being myself for a change.”

“For a change?”

“Yah. Don’t you think I look better and stuff?”

“Well ... yeah. You look kinda sharp as far as certain standards go, but...”

“Hey, wanna drink or something?”

Deidre shook her head.

“Wanna take a dip in the pool?”

“No, thanks.”

“Okay. But sit down—you’re making me like, nervous and stuff.”

“Not as nervous as you’re making *me*, to be sure,” said Deidre, perching on an arm of the couch.

Alice wrinkled her nose. “How so?”

“All ... er ... *this*.”

“All this, Dee, happens to be a chance to express myself and fulfil my destiny without all that like, *weirdness* and stuff.”

“Weirdness?”

“The Victorian clothes and talk and stuff.”

“I’m sorry, Alice. But is this some kind of a joke?”

“Of course not. Hey, nothing’s changed between us, has it? We can still be friends and stuff.”

Deidre stood up. “And stuff, and stuff, and *stuff*. Stuff and nonsense, Alice. Stuff *this*!”

“What do you mean, Dee?”

“Don’t you realise what you’re doing?”

Deidre stopped, narrowed her eyes and grinned. “I get it ... and *please* tell me it’s true—you’re playing it so-called normal so you can be released, right? So you can get out and continue your mission, right?”

“M-my mission?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten!”

Deidre slumped into the couch, sank her face in her hands, and burst into tears. Alice stood up, dithered, and searched for words.

“L-look, Dee. You’ve found your thing and you’re happy, and it’s like, *great* and stuff...”

“I found my ‘thing’ through *you*, Alice. I was brought up with blood-thirsty insanity. All my brothers could think and talk about was violence, sports, and war. My dad, an ex-Desert Storm vet, was no better. He bragged about his exploits and beat on everyone, including mom. I just retreated. Then I found that poem in a book in my grandmother’s trunk.

*He lived in a world of fantasy (like me),
Where all were mad but he...*

He lived in a world..., Alice echoed faintly.

“Right,” Deidre continued. “Then I just wanted to love people and be kind and make my little world a better place for the people in it. Got me expelled from Belmont High. Crazy, Mom called me, and she did something about it. Threw me in here.”

“That is a bummer!” said Alice.

“Yes, at first. But you know what? I found I was making people happy here, and we joined one another in our dreams. I mean, poor old Mr. Hatter was actually suicidal when I first came.”

“So I suppose he wouldn’t be living if it wasn’t for you,” Alice said reflectively.

“Exactly. And I wouldn’t be here still going for it, if it wasn’t for *you*, Alice. I’d have gone back to being the same ol’ drab, dull, and dreary Deidre Dudley. ... Oh, this is so sad,” she added, bursting into tears again.

They like to be rich and be churchy..., Deidre plaintively went on. *And wage their cruel wars without end. I won’t let their pollutions besmirch me...*

I’d far rather heal and mend..., Alice mumbled and sank into the couch.

She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. Finally, with mascara running down her cheeks, she looked up at Deidre who handed her a tissue and grinned.

“Gothic is so you...”

“*Not!*” Alice said, grinning through her tears. Then she closed her eyes and shook her head.

*So here’s to dear Alice’s Mad Hatter,
And the Walrus’s cabbage and kings,
So what if it’s mad, does it matter
If to children it happiness brings?*

“Goodness!” she muttered. “Where have I been?”

“Insane,” said Deidre. “And you didn’t even know it.”

Alice laughed in a sadly ironic tone, and stood up.

“No! *They’re* mad, and they don’t even know it!” she said, her voice rising in pitch.

*It’s they who are living in dreams,
It’s I who am glad, and I’ll show it,
I’ll b-boogie on in spite of their screams!*

“That’s the spirit!” shrieked Deidre.

Alice marched into the clothes closet, disrobed, and pulled her pinafore dress from its hanger, along with her bloomers, stockings, and garters. After she had put them on, she heaved a relieved sigh and blinked her eyes.

“Yes,” she said, pulling on her cowboy boots. “Where have I been?”

Deidre meanwhile had poured a couple of glasses of a deep red grape beverage, courtesy of the minibar.

So here’s to the light in the plaza! she sang as she and Alice clinked glasses.

*So here’s to the madness that sings!
Would you rather have shooting in Gaza...*

She paused to let Alice sing.

Than a girl who is happy with rings?

“I do so adore rings!” Alice broke off to say. “I have ever such a large collection at home. Brandon is forever teasing me about it. ...”

She suddenly felt a warm throbbing sensation and reached into her pinafore pocket. With a delighted gasp, she saw that her key ring was glowing, and the inscriptions were as clear and sparkling as before.

“Thank You, Jesus!” she exclaimed.

Suddenly the door flew open. “Sorry I didn’t knock,” snapped Ulva Zauber, glowering at the two girls as she marched in accompanied by two orderlies, “but I just *knew* something wasn’t going as planned.”

“As planned, ma’am?”

“Look at you, Alice. *Total* relapse!”

Ulva stormed across the room and locked the French windows. “Sorry, child, but such flagrant lack of cooperation and blatant disregard for our care can only be rewarded with a loss of privileges.

“And you, Deidre, can get *out* of here. If this is what a well-meaning attempt to provide necessary human companionship leads to, then I can only recommend that Alice stays in solitary ... er ... *selective* socialization until she realises her need to comply with our generous rehabilitation program.”

You’re only thinking of her, Deidre mockingly sang.

“Get *out!*”

With a longing backwards glance at Alice, Deidre opened the door and left.

“It’s going to work out admirably, my dear friend,” Alice called after her, “through the power of the keys.”

“Shut up!” said Ulva. “And get out of those stupid clothes!”

“Why, ma’am?”

“’Cos I said so!”

“And wear what?”

“Anything, as long as it’s not that ridiculous garb.”

Alice felt the keys throb in her pocket and she smiled. “Certainly, ma’am. Pass me those jeans, the embroidered ones with the purple sequins.”

Ulva tossed them to her. Alice pulled off her dress and boots and attempted to step into the jeans, which immediately shrunk to the size of her forefinger. The orderlies advanced, but stopped in their tracks at Ulva’s signal of restraint. With a look of triumph, Alice tossed the jeans back to the nurse and they returned to normal size.

“I have *won*, ma’am!”

“Okay,” Ulva barked at the orderlies. “Take her!”

“Where?” one of them asked.

“To a vacant intensive care suite in the honoured guest wing.”

“You mean that awful place where I first met you?” Alice asked.

“Right,” said Ulva, turning on her heels and striding to the door.

“After an indefinite time of selective, if *any*, socialization, we’ll see who’s *won*. Goodnight.”

A few minutes later, as the door of a dark padded cell clicked behind her, Alice strangely enough felt no remorse, only an aching sadness for Deidre. She knelt beside the cot and prayed for her.

“And I do want to say I’m sorry for not taking this opportunity to have that quiet time with You,” she added. “I’m such a mess, but I know You understand. It’s just that if I had just ... well, there’s really no ‘just if I’ justifying, as Daddy says about these sort of excuses. I should have taken this time here as the opportunity from You that it was. I’m really, really sorry, Jesus.”

Alice wept, then she fell silent and nodded.

“I know You do,” she whispered at length. “I love You, too.”



Rubbing her eyes, Alice staggered blearily to the barred window. It was barely six o’clock in the morning.

“What on earth is going on?” she asked herself, having been woken by a clamour and honking vehicles outside in the street below. A crowd had gathered along with a convoy of trucks and truckers holding placards and picket signs:

Free Alice!

You are imprisoning a saint!

Give us back our Wonderland!

Suddenly a loudspeaker burst with the plaintive strains of “Wings of a Dove.” Alice winced—it was a live recording of her performance at the Waterhole. Then a voice boomed over a megaphone, and Alice recognised it as belonging to Officer Taggart.

“We understand that you are holdin’ a Miss Alice Pleasance as a hostage in this institution! We request that you release her at once.”

Alice peered down into the crowd. She squealed with delight to see Officer Taggart and the police officer who had taken her to the police station and Betty Trucker herself standing next to a police car with its lights flashing.

Betty took the megaphone.

“This is Alice Pleasance’s legal guardian speaking. I demand her immediate release. If not, these members of the Lonely Highway Trucker’s Union will go on strike until she is free. In short, that means, along with other necessities, Chompers and Big Eats won’t be gettin’ their ground beef, Starbuckets won’t be gettin’ their coffee ... and, last but not least, the Superbowl won’t be gettin’ their Coke, Gatorade, or Budweiser.”

At this, the front doors of the Buena Vista flew open and Ulva Zauber strode out, flanked by two orderlies. Alice watched as she and Betty along with the police officers engaged in what appeared to be a heated discussion. Presently, Nurse Zauber and her orderlies marched back into the building.

Uh-oh. She's probably heading straight up here, thought Alice, hastily getting dressed.

True to her expectations, but a couple of minutes later, a key rattled in the lock and Ulva let herself in.

"I don't know who or what put these clowns up to this, child," she fumed. "I had a watertight case built on your being a ward of the State, but you are now free to go."

"It's the 'No Coke, Gatorade, or Budweiser for the Superbowl' that clinched it," one of the orderlies wryly added.

"That is absolutely wonderful," said Alice, putting on her cowboy hat and swinging her knapsack over her shoulder. "I can show myself out, kind sirs and madam. Thank y'all ever so much for your 'hospitality.'"

As was to be expected, the attendance had created no small stir in the Buena Vista Mental Wellness Spa. The orderlies were hard pressed to keep order, and no amount of the nurses' inveigling* could prevent the patients from milling around to catch a glimpse of Alice as she triumphantly trotted out of the asylum's gates and into Betty Trucker's welcoming arms.

"Missed ya so much, kid."

"Missed you too, ma'am. But how on earth did you accomplish this?"

Betty pointed to the two accompanying beaming policemen. "With Officers Taggart and Wainwright vouchin' for me, and a little wranglin' with a high-paid lawyer, I was made your legal guardian. Not to mention this li'l show of support from mah trucker friends, courtesy of the Lonely Highway Truckers' Union."

"God bless them all," said Alice. "And Mr. Bart!"

"Yup," said the cowboy, who had made his way through the throng. "Wanda and me is mighty happy y'all got free. Wanda? Come here, babe..."

Wanda, dressed in her usual attire of micro cut-off jean shorts and cowboy boots, strutted up to Alice and hugged her.

"Sure am, baby. Soon as I heard from Betty here, I went to work."

"Wanda spent most of her nights on the job solicitin' support fer yer cause," said Bart.

"That must have been ever so hard on top of all your mechanic duties, ma'am," said Alice.

***inveigling**: charming persuasion

Wanda chuckled. "It was worth it fer a noble cause. And by the way, I'm no longer a Mae, but a Will!"

"Oh, that's wonderful! Mr. Will proposed?"

"Nope. *I* proposed and Chet accepted."

"I think we'd better be dispersin' this assembly and a-headin' on out," Officer Taggart interjected. "We got traffic jams a mile long."

Alice turned and scanned the crowd for Deidre Dudley, but to no avail. She did see, however, that Marcus O'Hare, Mr. Hatter, a sleepy-eyed Mr. Dormas, Don Quixote, and Faye Langley were frantically waving for her attention and communicating their farewells.

"Deidre?" Alice called out to them.

"I don't think she could bring herself to come out and see you leave," Faye tearfully responded, "but I'll pass on your regards."

"Tell her that she, along with all of you, shall be in my prayers," said Alice. "As I hope I shall be in yours."

"You can bet on that!" said Faye.

"Yup, y'all can bet on that!" said Betty.

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DISCOMFORT ZONE

But were you able to get your soybean shipment to ... umm ... wherever it was on time, ma'am?" Alice asked Betty once they were cruising on a southbound highway.

"I was. Then I doubled back for another shipment and lickety-split on down to get you freed. I called Officer Wainwright, and he wuz as nice as pie. Said you wuz a good sort. He didn't have too much respect as it was fer Pastor Hal.

"Now we've made it on through that there hurdle," Betty said as they eventually pulled into an expansive palm tree-lined car park. "Before we get ready for the next one, I believe you deserve a night in the lap of luxury. No padded cells or truck stop layovers."

"I am grateful for ... er ... *whatever*, ma'am."

"It's on my insistence!" said Betty. "And you can thank the Lonely Highway Trucker's Union for takin' up a collection for you. This is a li'l paradise hotel recommended by a health-conscious Californian trucker woman I know."

"Welcome to Comfort Zone Convenience hotels," the receptionist said to his computer screen as Alice and Betty entered a breezy sandstone-walled foyer. "Can I help you?"

"A room?" said Betty.

“Reserved?”

Betty shook her head.

The receptionist’s eyes were still on the computer screen. “Let’s see ... We have a double for one hundred and twenty-five.”

“That’ll be great,” said Betty.

“ID?”

Betty slipped him a credit card.

“Non-smoking?”

“Smoking,” said Betty.

“That’ll be a one hundred and fifty dollar liability fee, ma’am,” said the receptionist and tapped the keyboard.

“What! Why?”

“In the event that the young lady here encounters non-wellness hazards due to second-hand smoke.”

“Then I’ll take a non-smoking.”

“Too late, ma’am. You said you wanted smoking.”

“I didn’t. I just wanted to...”

“The computer has already processed the information, ma’am.

However, for twenty-five dollars, we at Comfort Zone Convenience offer a waiver of responsibility, signed by the young lady here absolving the hotel from any liability.”

“Fine,” said Betty. “We’re tired.”

“How about your water?”

“Water?”

“A case of a dozen bottles is delivered to your room daily. Do you want to risk common H₂O, or benefit from low sodium, non-alkaline, arsenic- and fluoride-free Power Water, double-ionised with medical-grade oxygen?”

“Price is the deciding factor,” Betty replied.

“Common H₂O is two dollars a bottle, and Power Water is five, ma’am.”

“No question, then. Common H₂O.”

“And your pillows and pillowcases?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want those manufactured with common, mucous-inducing materials, or for an extra hundred dollars, organic non-allergenic fibre?”

Betty shrugged and looked at Alice. “No matter to us, as long as they’re soft and cheap.”

“Hmmm ... common, toxic...,” the receptionist muttered and tapped more keys. “And your mattress? Common spinal dysfunction-inducing, or again, for an extra hundred dollars, ergonomic spinal column-correction contour?”

Betty shrugged again. "I guess we're going common all the way. I'll take the cheapest. All the same to me, as long as they're comfortable."

"It's not all the same, ma'am," the receptionist petulantly retorted. "We at Comfort Zone Convenience hotels endeavour to provide our guests with the safest, guilt and fear-free, non-toxic, non-carcinogenic, organic, biodegradable environment and amenities available on this planet, taking into consideration the latest scientific findings regarding neurological, biological, ecological, and nutritional wellness. This we have painstakingly incorporated into our..."

As the receptionist continued his monolog, Alice, who was becoming bored, strolled over to the magazine and gift shop. She had picked up a *Newspeak* magazine when the cashier handed her a pair of disposable plastic gloves.

"If you will please note the sign overhead, Miss."

In the interests of a virus-free environment, all customers are required to wear the necessary disposable items upon request of the sales personnel. We apologise for the inconvenience.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Alice and gasped upon seeing the magazine cover. The shop assistant promptly handed her a facemask.

"If you are going to exhale like that, Miss, I'm afraid it will be necessary to wear one of these. Bacterial containment, you understand. I apologise for the inconvenience."

Alice rolled her eyes, but strove to remain calm. "Hmm. Anyway, ma'am, can I quickly show this magazine to my friend over at the reception desk? I'm sure she will be ever so interested in purchasing it."

"By all means, Miss. But if she is to handle the item without buying it, she will have to wear the gloves."

"She can borrow mine," said Alice.

"I am sorry, Miss. Should you transfer the microorganisms on your hands to her through the gloves and she becomes indisposed through a resultant infection, then we at Comfort Zone Convenience could be held liable. She has to wear a separate pair of gloves. I apologise for the inconvenience."

"I notice you're taken with that magazine, kid," a man said, looking over Alice's shoulder as he flipped through a copy of *Monkey Business Weekly*. "At least the cover. Know that chick?"

Alice turned and discreetly appraised the man. He was about middle-aged, just a little taller than she; unshaven, unkempt, and dressed in a jogger top and worn jeans. His breath reeked of liquor.

"Why, indeed I do, sir. As more of an acquaintance, though."

The man reached into his pocket and lit a hand-rolled cigarette. "Must be heartbreaking for her," he said, and for a few seconds broke

into a hacking cough until he resumed. "BSN has covered it for a few nights now. Media's ruthless, as you know."

"I must admit I do, sir," Alice replied, noticing with puzzlement that the shop assistant objected to neither the man's smoking nor his browsing through magazines without having to wear gloves. She also noticed, however, that an emaciated, well-dressed middle-aged woman who had just walked into the shop was observing their interaction with eagle-eyed suspicion.

"That's for sure, kid," said the man. "They didn't let up on you for a second."

"Me?"

"Yeah, I remember. Everyday Hugh and Krye's news agencies were smearing the 'scatty skater' who was supposedly perpetrating hate messages against the unseen powers that be. Didn't believe a word of it, though, having suffered plenty myself from the press."

"Glad to know that, sir," said Alice. "I mean, that you didn't believe all that. But you were *there*?"

"*Was*! My wife and I followed the saga with great interest. Then it came out that you had been committed, and after that ... silence. Anyway, I need to get going. It's been a real pleasure to meet you, Alice."

"A pleasure to meet you too, sir," Alice said with a curtsy, and the man walked off to browse more magazines.

"Alice?" exclaimed the shop assistant. "*The* Alice?"

"Why yes, ma'am. Why?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"Well, I didn't know who you are. You just seemed..."

"Yes, and that man you were talking to should be all the more ashamed of himself," the emaciated woman interrupted, addressing Alice.

"Ashamed of himself, ma'am? What on earth for?"

"For knowing who you are, and yet approaching you in such a familiar..."

The woman stopped at a discreet beckoning signal from the shop assistant, and walked over to the counter. The assistant whispered in her ear and the woman approached the man who was now standing in the far corner browsing pinup magazines.

"I want to apologise, sir," she said.

The man hastily tucked the magazine back into the rack and stared blankly at her outstretched hand.

"Apologise? For what?"

"I didn't know who you are. I'm sorry."

“Sorry for what?” he said, and shuffled out of the shop.

“So, who is he?” Alice discreetly inquired of the cashier.

“Why, that’s Benjamin Goldstone. One of the richest film producers in history. And you didn’t know?”

Alice shrugged. “No, ma’am. Why?”

“Usually people treat him like dirt, and no one talks to him unless they know who he is.”

“That’s ever so sad,” said Alice. “He’s a very kind man.”

“Maybe. But he filters his interactions with his ... disguise. I must say, Miss Pleasance, I found it commendable that you treated the gentleman with respect, not knowing who he was. Anyway, he financed the whole convention.”

“Convention, ma’am?”

“Alice!” Betty called from the lobby.

“Must away, ma’am. Oh, and the gloves for my friend.”

“In your case, that won’t be necessary, Miss Pleasance, ma’am,” the receptionist said with a plastic smile. “Nor the facemask.”

Alice thanked her and returned to Betty who was standing stooped and weary as the desk clerk continued.

“Furthermore, we boast a biodegradable, algae-friendly, chemical- and chlorine-free swimming pool...”

“You mean to say, sir, that green pond out there is a swimming pool?” said Alice.

The clerk cleared his throat. “Yes, Miss.”

“And people swim in it?”

“Of course. As I said, we at Comfort Zone Convenience hotels endeavour to respect the environment, even the natural development of still water.”

“Maybe we should look someplace else, Alice,” Betty said with disgust.

“Sorry, madam. Once you’ve reserved, you pay the full fee, whether you stay here or not.”

“What? But I haven’t reserved yet!”

“According to the computer, you have. Once the selections have been entered in, the computer registers you as having reserved a room.”

“And I can’t cancel?”

“You can, madam, but you pay the full fee. I apologise for the inconvenience.”

“But this is *crazy*,” said Betty.

“It’s fully explained on our website.”

“I guess we have no choice,” Betty mumbled.

“Okay, madam, so do you have any bags?”

Betty nodded. "An overnight bag."

"Please put it on the scale."

Puzzled, Betty nevertheless put her small suitcase onto a weighing machine situated next to the desk. The desk clerk nodded. "And you, Miss?"

"A backpack."

"Nothing to declare?"

"Declare? No sir."

"Jes' that and the clothes on her back," said Betty.

"Okay. So after passing your bags through security over there on your right, we ask that you both kindly remove your shoes and do the same."

"Do what?"

"Pass through the security check. It's in the interest of hotel safety. We apologise for the inconvenience."

Alice and Betty heaved weary sighs, and walked over to a uniformed guard who placed the bags on a moving belt, which took them through an x-ray machine. Pressing a button, the guard stopped the belt and looked sternly at the computer screen.

"You are in possession of a box of matches, ma'am?"

Betty nodded.

"For what purpose?"

"I'm a pyromaniac!" said Betty and laughed. "To light my cigarettes, of course."

"This is a non-humorous facility, madam."

"So I bin told."

The guard put on plastic gloves and unzipped the bag. "In the interest of hotel security I shall have to confiscate them."

"Afraid we'll burn the place down?" Betty said with a grin.

"We are prepared for any eventuality, ma'am. And it's no laughing matter."

"No," said Betty, "just ludicrous."

"We expect our guests to follow the Comfort Zone Convenience Hotel security and safety guidelines, ma'am," said the guard and zipped up the bag. "We apologise for the inconvenience. However, you are cleared to go to your room."

Betty and Alice returned to the desk clerk who presented them with a strained smile and an electronic card. "Here's your key, ma'am. Room two-forty-five, and a complimentary brochure printed on tree-free paper for your perusal."

Betty snorted and turned to Alice. "Let's dump off our bags and then go shop for snacks. There's a Twenty-Four-Seven down the road within walking distance."

“Let’s do, ma’am. But look at this,” Alice whispered, drawing Betty aside. “Front page!”

Betty’s mouth fell open. “Tammy! Looks gorgeous as usual, but freaked out. And what’s this headline?”

TV EVANGELIST, PASTOR HAL HAMSTRUNG, IN SLEAZY SCANDAL WITH HIS SECRETARY, TAMMY TRUCKER!

Betty flipped the pages and Alice looked over her shoulder.

Following the suspicions of an established senior female member of the Church of the Second Work of Grace, Pastor Hal and his young secretary, Tammy Trucker, were trailed and discovered engaging in sordid intimacies in his office and a nearby motel.

“The children and I are devastated!” Hamstrung’s wife said today. “I had no idea. The woman is less than half his age!” Divorce proceedings begin next month. Tammy’s parents, Horace and Hilda Trucker, long-term residents of Hickory Falls, Arkhoma, were unavailable for comment.

“Poor Mom and Pop,” said Betty. “Wish there was somethin’ I could do.”
“We can pray for them,” said Alice. “And we can give them a ring.”
“A ring?”

“Oh ... a telephone call.”

“Yup, we should, Miss Alice. I’m sure jes’ hearin’ your sweet li’l voice on the phone will mean the world to ’em.”

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AN UNCONVENTIONAL CONVENTION

After enjoying a walk in the late afternoon breeze, contrasting the restrictive atmosphere of the hotel, and happy that they could shop at a “normal” food store, Alice and Betty returned to their room with armloads of grocery bags. Betty put the perishables in the small refrigerator, and as Alice busily arranged the remaining food items in the overhead closets, she settled herself on the bed and clicked the TV remote. “Watchin’ a bit of this, Alice. Then I’m fixin’ to take a nap. Any plans?”

Alice shook her head, she was curiously studying a large box-like contraption near the kitchenette that resembled a microwave oven but with many more buttons and settings. Suddenly there was a knock and the door opened.

“I thought we put up the ‘do not disturb’ sign,” said Betty.

“We did.”

“Sorry, dears,” said a flustered young valet. “Sensors indicated that you are possessing undeclared non-premise purchased foodstuffs. Is that the case?”

“Yeah,” said Betty. “Food here in the hotel is exorbitant.”

“That very well may be, ma’am, but in the interests of your wellness and security, we require that you run all non-hotel purchased food products through the analyser.”

“You mean this microwave looking thing, sir?” Alice asked.

“Very funny. Micros are forbidden here, Miss. Anyway, the results are recorded and billed to your room.”

“What?” Betty said. “You mean we *pay*?”

“Yes, ma’am. Along with the security check, you are supposed to declare all non-premise purchased foodstuffs when you arrive, and for the duration of your stay. We apologise for the inconvenience, but we cannot be held responsible for any untoward dietary-related incidents.”

“This is *insane*,” groaned Betty.

“It’s in the interests of our guests’ wellness and the hotel’s liability, ma’am. So if you would kindly place the items one by one in the nutritional analyser. Instructions are clearly outlined in the complimentary Comfort Zone Convenience brochure. Failure to comply will result in a fine. We apologise for the inconvenience. Thank you, ma’am. Thank you, Miss.”

The valet bowed and left, leaving Betty and Alice staring at each other, dumfounded.

“Okay, let’s start with the ... er ... ‘crisps,’” Betty said with a wry smile.

Alice flipped through the brochure until she stopped at a page and began reading the instructions for operating the Carb ’n’ Cal Fear-Free Foodstuff Analyser. “First, remove the contents from their containers and place in the receptacle provided.”

Betty tore open the bag of crisps and placed them into a ceramic bowl.

“Now press the button marked carbohydrate content.”

Betty did so. After some flashing of lights and a whirring sound in the machine, the display flashed a row of numbers, a percentage, and \$2.50.

“What?” Betty was incredulous.

Alice shrugged and shook her head. “Shall I continue, ma’am?”

“I guess we have to.”

“Next is calorie count,” said Alice. “There are about a dozen buttons all together—calories, saturated and polyunsaturated fats, cholesterol, sodium, preservatives, wheat, nuts...”

“It’s *nuts* alright! It’ll take forever.”

“Yes, ma’am, but it says here that we can select auto, and it does the whole analysis. Oh, and if we want to get our ‘risk factor level,’ we can enter in our personal medical records and wellness details—blood pressure, pulse rate, blood sugar level, etc.”

“I have no idea of any of mine,” said Betty.

“Nor do I, ma’am.”

“Jes’ go ahead and run the analysis, baby.”

After about fifteen seconds of whirring and flashing, the machine’s screen displayed the individual results of the potato chips’ analysis along with a sum of \$12.35.

“An expensive bag of chips,” said Betty, curling up on the bed. “Fergit it. We can go dump it all in my truck fer later. Wish we hadn’t checked in here. So, Alice, still no plans?”

Alice poured herself a glass of water, sat down at the desk, and opened her backpack. “I was considering exploring the premises, ma’am. They have a library, some art and curiosity shops, and the grounds do look rather nice. But first I shall take a little prayer vigil with my pack of cards.”

Betty turned on her side and closed her eyes.

“Prayer vigil with a pack of cards?” she mumbled.

“It’s yet another long story, ma’am,” Alice said, seeing that Betty was dozing off. “I can tell you later.”

“Suit yerself. ...”

Betty was snoring and fast asleep by the time Alice tiptoed out of the room and took the elevator down to the reception area. At the entrance of a corridor, a placard displayed on an easel said: “The Wonderland Commission Convention.”

Oh, Alice thought, if it’s anything to do with the commission that I was involved in with the cards, this could be interesting.

“Trixie Barr,” she muttered as she dawdled past the sign and down the carpeted hallway that displayed various framed pictures of cards and even characters with which she was familiar. “Ace Belote. ... Oh, and there’s old Mr. Sage. Amazing.”

“It most certainly is,” a woman’s voice responded.

Alice turned. A regal elderly woman was walking behind her. Atop her long silver hair was a black cowboy hat, and she was clad in black jeans, cowboy boots, and a cream linen blouse patterned with red hearts. She smiled knowingly, and her clear blue eyes flashed through smoke-tinted glasses.

Stopping in her tracks, Alice gasped with recognition. “M-Margot?”

The woman nodded. “The Queen of Hearts at your service.”

“At *my* service, ma’am? I mean, Your Highness?”

“That’s right. ‘I am among you as one that serveth,’ didn’t He say?”

“He did, Your Majesty. But...”

“So what’s your next step?”

“My next step?”

“In your commission to reach the lost tribe of David?”

“I must say I’m quite clueless. You are the one, if I may say so, who would know that.”

Margot chuckled. “I’m sorry, Alice. I expected that would be a difficult question to answer, but I am deeply interested in your ‘take’ on how to reach them. You are doing so well.”

“I am, Your Majesty?”

“*Very* well, sweetheart. Pedro and I are so encouraged. You and those like you make it worth it all.”

Alice blushed and shut her smarting eyes. “But I’ve blown it so big-time, like at the Waterhole, the trailer park, and finally at that mental place, I backslid so badly. ...”

Margot shook her head. “You don’t know how proud we are of you. We salute you, Queen Alice.”

As though the turmoil of the past few days had crashed into her being, Alice burst into tears. Margot took her in her arms and suggested they sit on a couch in the secluded corner of a nearby lobby.

“I know it seems too big a big load for such small shoulders,” she whispered, discreetly acknowledging perplexed passers by with a nod and a smile as she and Alice sat together, “but your extremity is God’s opportunity.”

“It’s exciting and all, ma’am,” Alice blubbered into Margot’s blouse. “And I’m really not murmuring, honestly, but it just doesn’t seem like it’s going to be over soon, and I just want to go home. At least for awhile.”

“Can I put a challenge to you, Alice?”

Alice nodded and took Margot’s offer of a tissue.

“Well, if you were to know that it could be all over right this second, and you could be back home in Winsley Barnes, would you do it?”

As she wiped her eyes, Alice took thought for a few moments and shook her head.

“Not knowing what would have happened?” Margot continued. “Whether you would have met up with Don Quixote, Tracy, Deidre and all those sheep again? Not being sure if they had come through ... Rummy even?”

Alice blushed. “How do you know about all these people, ma’am?”

Margot smiled and handed her another tissue. “We get reports from your key craft. Pedro gets some, but mostly they’re sent directly to channels on Earth.”

Alice winced.

“Don’t worry. We’re delighted at how Joshua is using you. It’s going to be an inspiration to all the Family.”

“Is this adventure going to be a *Heaven’s Library* story? ... Like, *again?*”

“Possibly,” said Margot with a mysterious smile. “Depends on the pub teams, the reviewers, and all that.” She lowered her voice. “I don’t have a whole lot to do with those details these days, you see. Delegating, you know.”

Alice nodded, though a little perplexed.

“You probably don’t, honey. And you don’t have to. But suffice it to say that the Lord is using you in a remarkable way to reach the world. So many girls—and boys for that matter—in the Family feel inferior and even corny, but their magic and charm through the power of the keys is winning people that they’re unaware of. Here you are, for instance, dropped into a bizarre witnessing situation, feeling very uncool, and surrounded by people you wouldn’t normally relate to, but you *win* them, Alice! People like Rummy, for instance.”

Alice blushed again and rolled her eyes.

“Betty, too,” Margot continued. “Hardened on church, soured on religion, but thanks to you, not on God.”

“She has Jesus in her heart, Your Highness, and we’ve had some far-out discussions. She’s ever such a cool friend, too.”

Margot smiled. “We know. It would be wonderful if she could meet your Family Home in Winsley Barnes.”

“It so would, Your Highness. But how can I ... er ... you know, when I ... er ... wake up from this ... experience, *find* her?”

“Just tune in to the chimes, Alice, and you will. Anyway, I must away, as you say in your delightful Victorian English. Pedro’s sending out a CQ. So tell me, are you still considering a way out?”

Alice vehemently shook her head. “Oh no, Your Majesty! Like, no way, José. ... Oh I’m so sorry ... I would kind of like to speak more *posh* right now.”

“Oh, and by the way,” Margot whispered, “some members of the crowd will be a challenge—New Era Enlightenment and all that, but there are some lost little sheep among them. We’ll be praying for you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

After giving Alice a kiss on her forehead, Margot rose from the couch and glided elegantly out of the lobby, leaving Alice with a warm sensation in her heart and tears in her eyes—this time, the result of joy and not of frustration or grief.

Queen Margot herself! she mused as she looked wistfully at her key ring. *You could not have sent her at a better time. Thank You, Lord.*

“I presume you are ready,” a voice curtly said in an upper-class British accent. Alice looked up.. ... A short, heavyset woman wearing a blonde perm and a long gown was standing over her.

Alice jumped to her feet. “Ready, ma’am? For what?”

“You’ve forgotten? Or has chumming with the Queen of Hearts turned your head? Although turning it is admittedly better than swelling it, I suppose.”

“Upon my word, I honestly do not know what you mean, ma’am.”

The woman huffed and looked at her watch while straightening the straps of her ample brassiere. “This whole thing is being thrown, as they say in deplorable vernacular, for your sake, Queen Alice. And I am the one who has been running myself ragged to coordinate the affair. My husband and I, along with that delightful chap from the Useless Status, Benny Goldstone, have invested heavily in bringing it to pass.”

“Er ... excuse me, ma’am. But did you also say *Queen Alice*?”

“I did so. Oh, I suppose I should introduce myself. I am Brittany.”

“Oh, as in Brittany Spears, ma’am?”

“God forbid, child! As in Brittany Rhombus of the Royal House of Harrick.”

Alice curtsied. “Pleased to meet you, Your...”

“Auntie Britt to you, Alice, now that you have joined me in bearing the crown. Do you not remember?”

“You do seem familiar, ma’am. Oh my goodness, yes! Queen Britannica ... you were a playing ... umm ... was it in that ... er ... dream?”

“Experience, rather,” said Brittany, guiding Alice to the double doors of a conference hall. “Now we should make an appearance. Remember to walk stately. And should hors d’oeuvres be offered, politely decline, and remember to sip your drink holding the glass between your thumb and forefinger and with your little finger daintily extended.”

“I don’t know if I feel up to such a stately occasion, ma’am. ...”

“Fiddlesticks, child!” said Brittany as a pair of liveried valets opened the doors for them. Upon entering the hall teeming with elegant guests, Alice stopped and drew her breath. An enormous banquet table laden with all manner of sumptuous gourmet food and drink ran down the middle, and, on a stage at the far end, a tuxedo-clad orchestra was playing what Alice recalled as the Commission Symphony. To her astonishment, giant oil paintings executed in various styles from clas-

sical to modern depicting scenes from Alice's adventures with the cards graced the walls, and to her mortification, blown-up photos of her face hung from the high ceiling.

"Remember, this is all in your honour," Brittany added in a hushed tone.

"It most certainly is," effused a ruddy middle-aged woman sporting windswept greying reddish hair, weather-beaten khakis and canvas sandals. A giant black digital camera dangled from her neck.

"Alice," said Brittany. "Meet Lady Barbara Bushwhacker. She owns the Comfort Zone Convenience Hotel chain and is a devoted personal friend of mine. She is also a photographer for Vanishing Green Magazine, and a fervent wildlife preserver. Just recently, she successfully campaigned for legislation that would forbid the purchasing of a flyswatter without a license."

Alice gave a puzzled smile and curtsied. Lady Bushwhacker lowered her head and extended her hand.

"Silk taffeta," she remarked, fingering a portion of Alice's skirt.

"Hmm?" Brittany asked.

"My dress," said Alice, drawing her skirt aside, evidently disturbed by the woman's audacity.

Lady Bushwhacker nodded seriously and tapped Alice's foot with one of her sandals. "Yes. Aside from wearing leather cowboy boots, which stand as an outright and inhumane disregard for animal life, you obviously think nothing of endorsing a product that disregards the natural habitat of the silkworm."

"I'm sorry?" Alice was puzzled.

"Do you realise the inhumane exploitation of hundreds of enslaved silkworms it took to make one square inch of that cloth?"

"Hadn't really thought about it, to be honest, ma'am."

"Exactly. That's the problem with the whole world today. They pay no humane regard to the exploitation of the tiniest yoghurt culture, let alone the bigger environmental picture."

"I'm sure that is true, ma'am, but..."

"You must bear with Barbara, Alice," said Brittany. "She speaks her mind. That is one of the many virtues I appreciate about her—I can always count on her advice."

"I see, Auntie Britt. Although, if I may say so, I regard her manner as a little familiar considering her station," Alice said, surprised at her own boldness. "Hardly the way one would expect a subject to address royalty. And I would like to point out to Lady Bushwhacker that it has recently been brought to my attention that apparently this dress was fashioned in the nineteenth century during the reign of Queen Victoria."

“Then all the more reason to boycott the item!” Lady Bushwhacker exclaimed. “It was created at a time when the British Empire was at its *peak* of exploitation!”

“I beg to differ, ma’am,” said Alice. “Grandpa said that that was the very time when the British Empire was at its peak of *greatness* due to the blessings of God.”

“Blessings of *God*?”

“Exactly so, ma’am. Brought upon by their sending out missionaries and spreading the truth. That was until our nation was deceived and perverted by the teachings of Charles Darwin and his ilk.”

Lady Bushwhacker snorted. “You are as archaic in your simplistic little mindset as the clothes you wear, my sadly misguided child. I regret having endorsed this affair in one of my hotels. I am astounded and disappointed that Britt would keep you as company. You have said little so far, Britt. No comment?”

Brittany shook her head. “Except to say that I believe Alice is *right*.”

“Right? *Right*?” Lady Bushwhacker screeched. “How can you defend her opinion with such a highly subjective word?”

“Very easily, my dear friend,” said Brittany. “However, I do think you should lower your voice and calm down so we can proceed.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she went on to announce with a clap as Lady Bushwhacker stormed out of the hall, “the guest of honour at our humble gathering is now present. Queen Alice the Pleasance!”

A ripple of polite applause followed, and Alice surveyed the surrounding guests.

“I-I am afraid I am, like, *totally* unacquainted with most of you,” she said. “So I think it’d be cool to, like, start with the introductions. ...”

She rolled her eyes and looked at Brittany who smiled quizzically and then nodded.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Alice whispered. “It’s not coming out like I expected.”

“Carry on,” said Brittany.

Suddenly, a large, rotund older African-American gentleman in a royal blue silk evening suit approached Alice, and with an enormous black hand, clasped hers in a vigorous handshake.

“Mah angel of the Blue Chip,” he said, beaming into her eyes.

Alice reflected for a moment. “Oh, er ... why, yes, of *course*. ... Mr. C. C. Leroy! You were going to ... er ...”

“I wuz, li’l lady. But you saved mah life, and I believe that of many others here at this ceremony. We’s truly grateful.”

Alice curtsied. “Thank you, sir,” she said softly.

“And know what, angel? Mah career took an upswing with a hit record—*Blue Chip Angel*, a li'l blues number dedicated to you.”

With that, Leroy bowed, kissed Alice's hand and withdrew into the crowd. Alice was discreetly requesting a tissue from Brittany when a short, stooped older gentleman with balding white hair and a walrus moustache, and wearing a worn tweed sports jacket, limped forward and extended his hand.

“You may not remember me...,” he began.

Alice gasped. “Why, yes! Yes, of *course* I do ... *Mr. Sage!*”

While the two ardently embraced, Brittany calmly announced that more drinks were being served, and the guests dispersed to gather at the corner cocktail bar.

“Does this mean that I shall meet *all* the cards from my ... er ... dream at this gathering, Mr. Sage?” Alice excitedly asked. “It would be ever so ... cool.”

“Try ‘awesome!’” Sage said dryly then shook his head. “No, dear girl. I hope it is of no disappointment to you, but you will not meet them all until *He* comes to gather them to Him.”

Alice shook her head in amazement. “Phew, Mr. Sage, sir. That is certainly some wise revelation. I suppose that's why...”

“I'm called Mr. Sage, Miss.”

Alice giggled and hugged him again.

“Er ... Miss Pleasance, I do believe your presence is required on the stage,” Sage said, composing himself and pointing to Brittany who was furiously waving her hands to solicit Alice's attention.

“She is *delighted* to attend a press conference,” she was announcing.

“A press conference, ma'am?” Alice whispered, once she had joined Brittany. “But what about?”

“The *book*, my dear.”

“*Alice and the Cards?*”

“Of course, what else! Look around you. Goodness, dear! Where on Earth have you been?”

Alice stared numbly into the flashing cameras and took the microphone. She suddenly felt strangely dizzy.

“The b-book,” she muttered. “Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the book...”

“You wrote it, of course,” a gentleman called from the crowd. “Despite its attempt at anonymity.”

“I did not, sir. It is true, nonetheless, that it was based on my experiences.”

“Then who is the author?”

“I would rather not disclose the writer’s identity at this point. The general policy of our *Heaven’s Library* ... er ... staff has been to keep the earthly authors’ identities confidential whenever possible.”

“Yes, Mr. Sage?” she added, acknowledging his upraised hand.

“I think by and large that it is a fine policy, Your Highness, but I would like to commend whoever the author is for keeping my inane song in, which by the way, was a pleasant surprise.”

“Your song was ever so much fun, Mr. Sage,” said Alice.

“Thank you, Your Majesty, but back to the point. I agree that the focus should be not on the mere recorder of the events as much as on the person about whom the events were written—the very reason for this splendid affair—namely, yourself, Miss ... er ... Queen Alice the Pleasance.”

Sage’s observation drew a ripple of respectful applause from the gathering, and Alice bowed.

“Thank you all,” she said. “But I really only had to obey the Lord and...”

“You say ‘earthly writer,’ Your Majesty,” a slickly dressed man interrupted with a smirk and a wagging of his head. “Would you go as far as to say that there are other, ‘non-earthly’ entities involved?”

“I would go that far, sir,” said Alice. “There was a Mr. Lewis and a Mr. Charles, but I think they were one and the same. ... He apparently wrote the original ... oh dear. ... Excuse me, but I do feel rather dizzy.”

“Maybe you need a little sustenance?” Brittany suggested.

“I am fine, Your Highness, really. It’s just that ... well ... they are not all here.”

“Who are not all here?”

“The cards...,” Alice said drowsily, reaching out to steady herself. “How can I do prayer vigil or even play a full game of FreeCell with an incomplete deck? ...”

“Someone bring the poor girl a sachet of smelling salts!” Brittany ordered, summoning a couple of waiters.

Alice waved a hand in protest and knocked over a brimming cocktail glass. ...



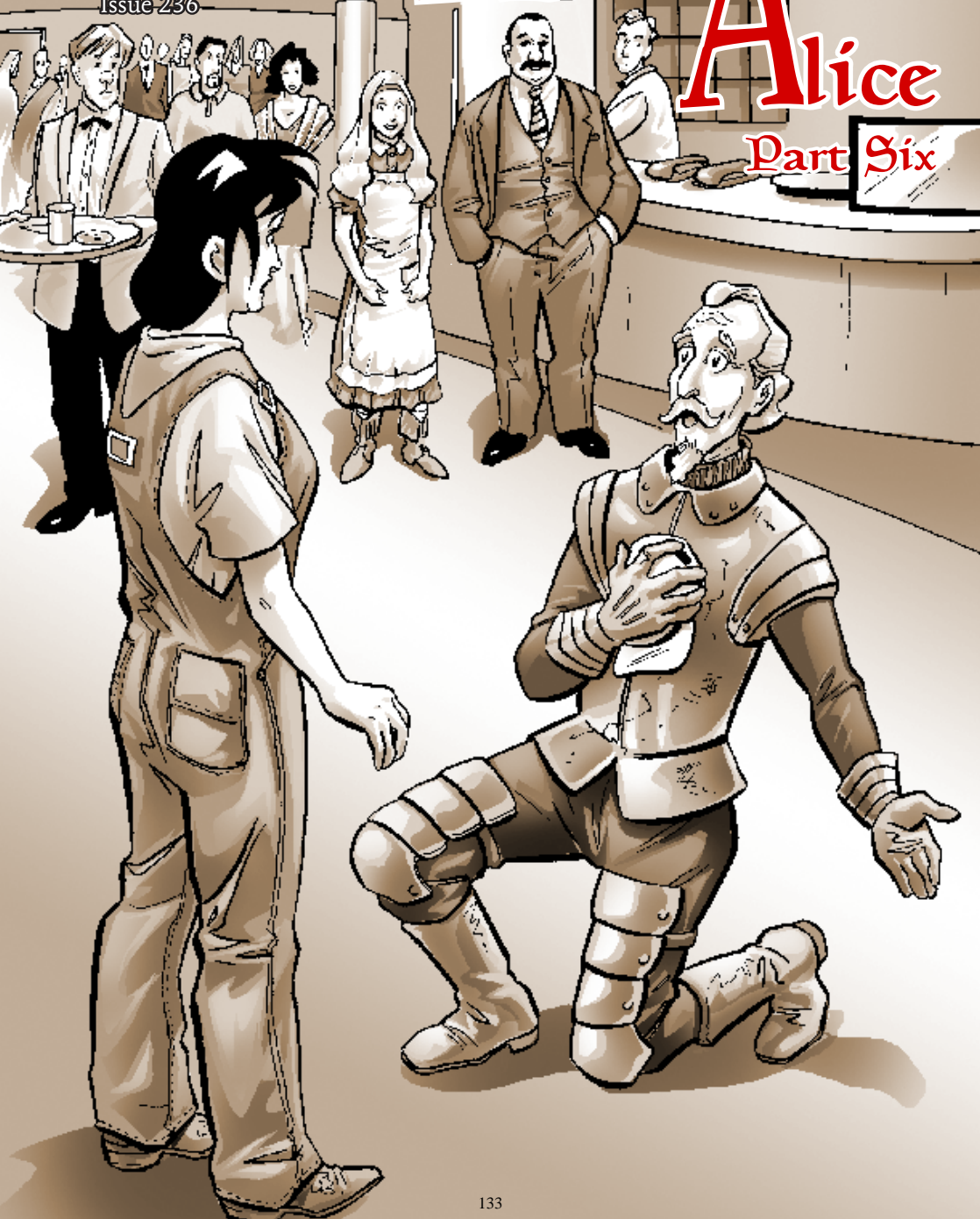
“You really needed that nap, baby. Even if it must’ve been a mite uncomfortable.”

Opening her eyes at the sound of Betty’s voice, Alice lifted her head from the hotel room table.

To be continued...

Apparently Alice

Part Six



The story so far: After being released from the mental wellness spa, Alice finds herself on the road again with Betty. They've checked into a rather health-obsessive hotel, where Alice attended a card convention.

And now, the conclusion. ...

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The UNPICKABLE ROSE

Curiously and curiously!" Alice muttered. "A dream within a dream!"

"What do you mean?" Betty asked, picking up a glass and some playing cards that had fallen on the floor.

"Well, ma'am, supposing I had fallen asleep in *that* dream and dreamed another dream in a dream? Is there ever such a thing? Well, I suppose there must be, because Don Quixote lived in dreams, and yet I presume that at night he still dreamed. ..."

"I don't know what you are rantin' on about, baby, but I jes' knows we both needed that there nap. You woke me up knocking over this here glass of water. And it's a beautiful sunset, by the way."

Alice and Betty stepped over to the window.

"Oh my goodness gracious!" Alice exclaimed at the sight of an old rusted car chugging through the hotel gates. "'Speak of the Devil,' as they say!"

"What?"

"It's Mr. Quixote himself!"

"Mr. who?"

"Don Quixote. Oh, I do hope this is not a dream—at least not a dream in a dream. It gets ever so confusing."

"I don't know no Donkey whoever, Alice. Is that some guy ya knew in the nuthouse?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's ever such a lovely man."

"Well, he *must* be nuts!" Betty remarked at seeing Don Quixote stumbling out of the car and looking bemusedly around him. "I mean, who walks around in a rusty suit of armour and a baseball cap?"

HL: Note that all parts of this story use British spelling.

Art by Jeremy; shades by Sabine

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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“He does, ma’am.”

“Why? Is he in a play or a circus of some sort?”

“No. He’s a knight.”

“I see. And who’s that?” Betty inquired about a portly, well-dressed Mexican who was puffing behind Don Quixote.

“I haven’t met him, but I believe that is Sancho Panza, his squire.”

“Squire, huh? Someone else with a screw loose?”

Alice grabbed Betty’s hand. “Oh, do let’s go downstairs and welcome him! You’ll just adore him.”

Presently, Alice and Betty were dawdling in the hotel foyer some distance behind Don Quixote as he wrangled with the baffled desk clerk.

“I am here to deliver the captives from this bastion of fear!” he was saying.

“This is the Comfort Convenience Hotel, sir,” said the desk clerk, discreetly picking up the phone.

“Who are you calling?” asked the Mexican man who was standing beside Quixote.

“An emergency number, Mr. Panza, sir.”

“¿Porqué?”

“Well, your friend seems to be ... er ... disturbed. Just hotel policy.”

“It won’t be necessary,” said Sancho. “Alonso is far from disturbed. He is here on a mission, and is a personal friend of Mr. Goldstone, who I believe resides here. Takes the whole upstairs suite, am I right?”

The unsettled desk clerk put down the phone, and while Sancho talked with him, Don Quixote turned about and his eyes fell on Alice and Betty. He approached them and knelt before Alice.

“Your Majesty.”

“Arise, sir, and meet...”

“I know, Your Majesty,” he said with a sigh. Putting a hand to his breast, he looked dreamily into Betty’s eyes and softly said, “Dulcinea.”

Alice stifled a giggle.

“Name’s Betty Trucker, mister. Nice try.”

Quixote shook his head. “I know thee as Dulcinea. ...”

“I also believe you know this here li’l girl as Alice,” said Betty. “From back there at the cuckoo...”

“Castle, ma’am,” said Don Quixote. “From which I escaped with the help of my faithful squire. And yes, I have the honour to be acquainted with her majesty. But little did I know just how noble and beautiful her lady-in-waiting would be.”

“This *is* cuckoo,” said Betty. “Let’s go, Alice.”

“Wait, ma’am, you’ll see,” said Alice. “Mr. Quixote, I notice you had your base ... er ... helmet made. It’s extremely becoming.”

“I thank thee, Your Highness. Mr. Hatter forged a fine piece of head-wear. Umm ... may I invite you fair maidens to dine with me?”

“I ... er ... *we* ... er...,” said Betty.

“We’d *love* to, Mr. Quixote,” said Alice.

“I would jes’ need to change,” said Betty.

“Change, milady? Why, the gown is beautiful.”

Betty rolled her eyes and was about to excuse herself when Sancho Panza walked up.

“Everything is in order, sir,” he said. “We have the executive suite.”

“Splendid!” said Don Quixote. “And we have the pleasure to dine with Queen Alice and her ladyship this evening. We shall meet in the hotel’s restaurant.”



“So what are you going to wear, ma’am?” said Alice, once she and Betty had returned to their room.

“What do you mean? For what?”

“Well, for such an occasion as being wined and dined by Don Quixote himself. I suppose *I* don’t have a choice, but I thought you wanted to...”

“On second thoughts, I’m goin’ in these here dungarees, Alice. Oil stains an’ all! If he imagines it’s a beautiful gown, I’ll see if he puts his money where his mouth is when he’s bein’ seen with me in that hoity-toity restaurant. Anyway, you’re dressed appropriately, bein’ ‘Your Majesty’ in his eyes. Hey, what *is* all that about, anyway?”

“It’s another one of those long stories, ma’am.”

“And you’re a walkin’ library of ’em, Miss Alice. I need to check ’em out someday. Okay, well, a li’l spray of perfume and we’re on our way.”

Within a few minutes, Betty and Alice were sitting at the reserved table in the Comfort Zone Convenience Hotel’s Dodo Memorial Restaurant awaiting their host who arrived half an hour later excusing his tardiness with the fact that he couldn’t quite make up his mind what flowers to bring “her majesty” and Dulcinea.

He bowed and presented Alice with a bouquet of dandelions. She smiled, nodded, and graciously accepted it. Don Quixote presented the same to Betty. She sneezed.

“Allergies,” she said apologetically and pulled out a tissue from her overalls. She wiped her nose and looked around for a waste receptacle.

“Suffer me to take care of it, milady,” said Quixote and took the tissue from her.

“Why, thanks, mister,” said Betty, then her face dropped. Don Quixote had tucked the tissue in the lining of his breastplate.

“I shall carry this handkerchief with me as a token in the fray!” he announced.

“It’s disposable,” said Betty with a mystified sideways glance at Alice.

“So you are Mexican, Secor Panza?” Alice inquired.

“I am, Your Majesty.”

“But I thought Sancho Panza was Spanish. At least in the movie ... *and* the book, of course.”

“He was,” said Don Quixote. “But today, since my native country hath cast me out as insane and immoral, I could find not there a squire as faithful and true as Sancho until I travelled to Mexico. Alack, there are no windmills to fight, yet there are armies of giant conjurers to vanquish that summon up the black demon of oil. ... Do you wish to look at the menu?”

Betty and Alice nodded, and stared for a few moments at the Dodo Memorial Restaurant logo embossed on the menus in gold leaf along with the hotel’s declaration of dedication to preserving endangered species.

“May I take your orders?” a thin, rather sickly looking waiter asked with a snivel.

“I’ll take the burger,” said Betty. “Medium rare.”

“Me too,” said Alice.

“Oh, by the way, Miss. We are not permitted to pick the dandelions here at Comfort Zone Convenience. We are, however, committed to respect their natural habitat.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Please dispose of them in the organic compost receptacle over there. Anyway, your burgers. BSE- and bovine-free or common, carcinogenic...”

“We’ll take a common cooked *cow*, cholesterol and all!” Betty snapped in frustration. “Sorry for the inconvenience.”

Don Quixote laughed, and he and Sancho ordered the same.

“To drink, Miss?”

“I’ll take a bubbly water,” said Alice.

“Will that be...?”

“*Water*, please sir,” said Alice. “The cheapest and the *bubbliest*.”

“And a hearty red wine,” said Quixote.

“For me too,” said both Betty and Sancho.

“Will that be...?”

“*Vino*, my man!” bellowed Don Quixote with a twinkle in his eye as he brought his fist down on the table. “The fruit of the vine. Blood red and plenty of it! Or *you* will be an endangered species!”

“Y-yes, sir,” the waiter whimpered, and scuttled off.

Presently, the food and the beverages were delivered to the table. Don Quixote proposed a toast to friendship and there was a period of silence as they seasoned and tasted their food.

“Okay,” said Betty. “Not too bad.”

“Delicious, thank you, sir,” said Alice.

“You’re most welcome, Your Highness,” said Don Quixote. “So on to our plan of attack.”

“Plan of attack?” asked Alice.

“To liberate these captives, of course. Your Majesty would know.”

“What captives?” Betty asked.

“Captives of fearsome bondage to their phobias. Touch not, taste not, handle not.”

“That’s a bit extreme,” said Betty. “These people are here of their own free will.”

“Really, milady? I say, nay. They are here by decree of their mindsets, imprisoned by the whims and dictates of the airwaves. A far greater bondage than ever that which mere bars of iron and steel can inflict.”

“I don’t get it,” said Betty.

“Nor I,” said Sancho, and ordered a common shot of tequila.

“I do, ma’am,” said Alice. “What Mr. Quixote is saying, is that people here, and a great many more out there in the world, are imprisoned by what they believe, and what they believe is largely governed by what they are told through the TV, Hugh and Krye news agencies, and suchlike.”

“Well, I’m not!” said Betty. “Don’t matter what those guys, and even CBR, tell me.”

“For that I commend thee, milady,” said Don Quixote, and tipped his glass to hers. “Think for thyself.”

“I do,” said Betty.

With a sad smile, Quixote put his hand on Betty’s. “Then I beg thee, oh most noble, Dulcinea, open thine heart and life to the possibility of my presence in it.”

Alice felt decidedly uncomfortable and attempted to steer the conversation to the topic of Mexico, its history and people, which she found gained only Sancho’s attention, while Don Quixote further declared in sonorous whispers, his devotion to his Dulcinea.

“Let’s go, Alice,” Betty said suddenly, standing up from the table and looking unexpectedly flustered.

“Why?”

“But you will not take a dessert or another drink?” said Sancho.

“I am done for the night,” said Betty. “I’m just not used to...”

“Oh, do please be sweet, ma’am,” Alice whispered. “These gentlemen have been most awfully kind.”

“I realise that,” said Betty. “Thank you for your hospitality, guys. I’m sorry, but we must...”

“But what about our plan of attack?” Alice asked.

“Figure it out with Mr. Quixote himself if you want, baby. I’m going to bed. Goodnight, Mr. Panza, and goodnight, Mr. Quixote. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“I pray thee, fair Dulcinea,” said Don Quixote, rising from the table and following Betty out of the restaurant, “consider my request. To be sure, the thorns of thy refusal have enflamed nought in me but further admiration of thy virtue and only fuelled my determination to pluck the seemingly unpluckable rose.”

Stopping in the hotel lobby, with Alice and Sancho Panza standing at a distance, Don Quixote took off his baseball cap, held it to his breast and knelt on one knee before a blushing Betty Trucker.

*To pick the unpickable rose, he began singing in an operatic voice.
No matter how thick
The thorns where she grows.
To try, though my fingers are bleeding
To pluck the unpluckable rose.*

By now, a crowd had gathered from the lounge area, the knick-knack shops and the swimming pool, and was standing transfixed, having heard Quixote’s plaintive tones ringing from the lobby.

*This is my quest, to reach for your heart,
No matter the distance or vistas apart.
I’ll suffer the blows
Of innumerable foes...*

Quixote ended with an extended final note, a flourish of his hand, and a bow.

To pick the unpickable ro-o-o-ose.

Wringing her hands, Betty beckoned Alice to her.

“Let’s just go!”

“Where, ma’am?”

“Our room, of course. This is darn embarrassin’!”

“Oh, do stay, ma’am!” Alice pleaded. “Mr. Quixote obviously loves you very much. And he does sing beautifully, does he not?”

“Er ... very nice, but...”

“Then at least explain, ma’am. He will be so dreadfully offended.”

Betty shook her head. “No way, baby. Not only that, I’m checkin’ outta this Discomfort Inconvenience ASAP. No ifs, ands, or buts.”

“But you’ve paid an awful amount of money and there’s no refund.”

“I don’t care, Missy.”

With that, Betty stepped into an open elevator. “You comin’?”

“Shortly, ma’am. I must thank and bid goodnight to Mr. Quixote. And explain...”

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JOKEN 'N' KIDDEN

Early the next morning, not even pausing for breakfast, Betty, with an impatient eye on the clock, checked herself and Alice out of the Comfort Convenience Hotel.

“Why are you running from him, ma’am, if I may ask?” Alice asked as she scuttled after Betty towards Big Bertha.

Betty said nothing until she was sitting in the truck and turning on the ignition. “It’s obvious, ain’t it? He sees me as a beautiful princess and calls me Dulcinea, his long-lost love, and then treats me as such and takes my tissue and ... well, baby, it’s just too *much*.”

“I actually think it’s wonderful, ma’am!” said Alice. “I believe he sees people and things as they really are, if you know what I mean. Like in the spirit.”

“Well, he’s got it right about you. You do have that royal thing. But me?”

“You *are* royalty, ma’am, in God’s sight and in His Kingdom.”

Betty shook her head. “That’s mighty kind of you Alice, but you is jes...”

“Back at the cuckoo’s nest, ma’am, Mr. Quixote said that he’s seen princes walking as servants on the earth. I think he was quoting the Bible.”

“Yup,” said Betty. “Solomon.”

“Exactly. Why, Miss Trucker...”

“One thing my daddy made sure was that I read the Bible daily as a child. So?”

“Well Mr. Quixote is just like he was in that *ancient* movie, *Man of La Mancha*.”

“Can’t say as I’ve heard of it. Why?”

“Haven’t seen it for a long time, ma’am,” said Alice. “But he fell in love with a rather imprudent barmaid woman. He saw her as a princess.”

With a wistful smile, Alice continued,

*He lived in a world of fantasy
Where all were mad but he.
He lived in a world of madness
Where he alone was free!
He lived in a world of madness
Where only he was sane.
He brought them joy and gladness;
They only brought him pain!*

Betty shook her head. “I’m just a country cluck, Miss Alice. You don’t expect me to be a-readin’ your mind and gettin’ your mystical reasonin’. You British are always tryin’ to be...”

“No, Miss Trucker, ma’am. I just think it would be ever so nice if you could become ... you know, amorously *connected* with Mr. Don Quixote.”

“Matchmaking, Miss Alice?”

“Oh dear. I’m so awfully sorry. Brandon always teases me about being such an inveterate matchmaker; says I would have put Emma to shame. ...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m jes’ glad to see you have my future so well sewn up,” said Betty with a grin.



Despite a midmorning dust storm whipping up between Stony Ridge and Longhorn City, which necessitated Betty and Alice taking some refuge at a rest stop where they tucked into a *Smashfast*—the menu’s recommended copious morning meal—their journey to the border continued without a hitch. Having slept little the night before, Alice dozed intermittently, causing Betty to keep a considerate and constant adjusting hand on the radio’s volume control.

“I wanna apologise,” she said after a couple of hours upon seeing that Alice had straightened her seat and was now wide awake.

“About what, ma’am?”

“That discomfort inconvenience business. I did so wanna make things special for you, Miss Alice, after all that nuthouse stuff. Seems the hotel was jes’ another cuckoo’s nest. It jes’ didn’t turn out as I expected, and I feel mighty bad about it.”

“Oh no, ma’am. It was actually a most fascinating experience, at least for me. I got to meet the most interesting people, and I had the most encouraging dream. And for you ... well you got to meet...”

“Don’t say it, Alice,” Betty said with a laugh.

By late that afternoon, Betty and Alice pulled in at the border checkpoint where an immigration officer breezed up and requested their documents while another walked a pair of sniffing dogs around the vehicle.

“I claim the keys of protection,” Alice muttered, clutching the key ring.

“Been a nice day,” the officer chirped and browsed Betty’s passport and vehicle documents.

“Sure was,” said Betty, holding her breath. “And I trust it will continue to be.”

“It should be, ma’am, if we don’t find any contraband that would force us to impound your vehicle and put you in jail.”

“What?”

“Scared you for a moment, didn’t I? Jes’ jokin’. Nice passport picture, though.”

Betty blushed. “Why, thanks, officer.”

“However, this is just a portrait, ma’am.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since the tightening of border policies,” said the other official who had now joined his partner and was smirking over his shoulder at Betty’s papers, “governmental regulations now require female identification photographs to be explicitly full figure, and unclothed.”

“For official identification purposes only, of course,” he added with a wink.

Betty looked startled and the officer sniggered.

“Ha. That got ya sweatin’. Jes’ kiddin’, ma’am.”

“So, Miss Trucker,” said the first official, his leer turning into a grave expression. “Transportin’ a minor across the border for illicit purposes?”

“Wh-what?”

“Or smugglin’ drugs?” said his partner, tugging on the dogs’ reins. “Which one will it be? Or both?”

“Jes’ jokin’ ma’am,” the senior official said with a chuckle, and tossed her passport back to her. “And you, Miss, runnin’ away from home?”

Alice blushed. “O-of course not, sir.”

“Or lookin’ for questionable employment across the tracks?”

“Or even worse,” said his partner, who seemed to be stifling a giggle. “Fleein’ from an indictment for a high school shootin’?”

The officials then doubled up and howled with laughter, causing the dogs to bark, and Betty and Alice to gaze at the spectacle in amazement.

Finally, the senior officer managed to stand up straight and wipe the tears of mirth from his eyes. “This is rich! Jes’ kiddin’, Miss. Can I see your passport?”

Alice felt the key ring burn in her pocket. With a silent prayer, she pulled it out and handed it to him. Betty shot Alice a look of concern and rolled her eyes.

“Classy,” the officer remarked, holding the key ring up to the fading sunlight.

“Yup. They don’t make ’em like this over here anymore,” his partner drolly added as Alice squirmed.

“Anyways, Miss Alice Trucker,” said the senior officer as he handed the key ring back to her, “may you and your mom have a nice stay over there in Mexico.”

Alice breathed a silent praise and a sigh of relief.

“And by the way,” said the other, “wanna apologise. Didn’t realise you wuz mother an’ daughter. Wouldn’t’ve been so loose with the off-colour jokes.”

“That’s all right, sirs,” said Alice. “Grandpa says that a sense of humour is important.”

“Rightly so, Miss. Anyways, if you and your momma are ever passin’ through Lamesville, don’t forget to drop on by our Friday evening comedy show at the Crack-Up on the main street. My name’s Jess, Jess Joken, and my partner’s name is Jess too, Jess Kidden.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Joken and Mr. Kidden,” said Alice, and shook their hands. “And God bless you.”

“Why, God bless you, too, angel.”

With that, Alice and Betty tipped their cowboy hats and drove on.

“What extraordinary gentlemen,” said Alice. “A bit like Hee-Hee and Ha-Ha.”

“Hmm,” said Betty. “Don’t know as I cared for their style. But you have to admit, Alice, that you *are* rather extraordinary.”

“Not really, ma’am. It’s just that when I’m in this...”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” said Betty. “It’s the insight, the wisdom. Knowin’ how to handle people and stuff. Patience, for instance, like with those two hyenas and their tasteless humour. It’s ... *incredible*.”

Betty paused, smiled and shook her head. “I jes’ got a voice mail from Ron. It’s that once-in-a-blue-moon communication, you know, and usually only when he wants something. Except that this time he was mighty considerate, asked me about myself and stuff. Musta been your influence.”

Alice smiled coyly and shrugged as if in uncertainty, then silently remonstrated herself for such sham humility.

“Anyways, he was jes’ ravin’ on about you, Alice. He said that sometimes it was like he was talkin’ to a woman who was *centuries* old.”

Betty suddenly broke into that welcome laugh. “Maybe all those wild tales about you are true! You’re jes’ plain *weird*.”

Alice had to laugh also. “Yes, I am, ma’am. I’m like, just plain *special*. Good-type special, though, I hope. Hey, am I, like, talking *normal* now?”

“Since travellin’ with you, I don’t know what normal is anymore,” said Betty. “But you *are* sounding like Gina.”

“Who?”

“One of Ron’s girlfriends.”

Alice’s face dropped.

“From a couple of years back,” Betty quickly added.

Alice heaved a carefully hidden sigh of relief and continued. “But to answer your question, Betts, yeah, I have to say I feel I have, like, an *anointing* of wisdom. But it’s not of me—know what I’m saying?”

Betty nodded. “Then what’s it of?”

“Jesus, really,” said Alice. “The Word.”

“You mean the Bible?”

“Yeah, the Bible and stuff like hearing from Jesus today. I’ve been hearing from Him since I was, like, about five or six years old. It was all in the *MLKs*.”

“Okay. But you’ve obviously had some high-up type tutorin’ ... trainin’.”

“That’s about as high as it gets, Betts.”

Betty laughed again. “Let’s talk earth-physical now, okay, Alice?”

Alice nodded, stared at the road, and silently prayed for a few moments.

“Yes, I have. Besides having some super-cool shepherds and teachers, my parents had a lot to do with it. They’re involved in giving seminars to professionals, and my dad insists on bringing me along, so I get invited to dinners and birthday parties and stuff. My daddy especially drilled lots of things into me, on what he calls deportment and etiquette and stuff. It got a bit much sometimes, but I know it works, ‘cos I always get invited back! And I *love* parties!”

“It worked,” said Betty with a sober nod of her head. “It worked. Your dad sounds like a cool dude.”

“He is,” said Alice. Tears welled up in her eyes. “I’m missing him and Brandon, and home and friends, Miss Trucker. Not that you haven’t been a wonderful friend, too.”

“Thanks.”

“And Dinah, of course.”

“Who’s that?”

“My cat.”

“Tissues in back, sweetheart,” said Betty.

“Thank you,” said Alice. “But any idea when I’ll be going home?”

“No idea,” said Betty, and switched on the headlights into the setting sun. “I’m jes’ your chauffeur. You’re the one with the futuristic wisdom. I’m sure your Jesus has the answer.”

“He’s yours, too, ma’am,” said Alice, and reclined her seat.

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SLEEPING BAG REFLECTIONS

Crickets chirped in the stillness and stars twinkled sharply in the sky’s blue-black canopy as Betty rolled sleeping bags out onto the sand.

“I keep a couple of spares in case of company,” she said. “Like tonight.”

“You do this often, ma’am?”

“Every time I pass by this here way,” she said. “It’s my favourite star-gazin’ spot. Miles away from the noise of the cities, highways, motels, truck stops, and the like.

“And it’s safe,” she added, noticing Alice’s expression of concern at the sound of distant howls. “Coyotes. But that can of Sterno keeps ’em far ’n’ away. ...”

*Way down here you need a reason to move,
Feel a fool running your stateside games.
Lose your load; leave your mind behind, baby James.*

Betty dashed to the truck, flung open its doors, and turned up the radio. “Oh, and I jes’ love this song.”

*Oh, Mexico!
It sounds so simple; I just got to go.
The sun’s so hot, I forgot to go home,
Guess I’ll have to go now!*

“It’s a cute song,” said Alice, swaying to its Latin rhythm. “Brandon would like it.”

*Americano got the sleepy eye,
But his body’s still shaking like a live wire.
Sleepy secorita with the eyes on fire.
Oh, Mexico!
It sounds so sweet, with the sun sinking low.*

*Moon's so bright, like to light up the night;
Make everything all right.*

After zipping themselves up in their sleeping bags, Alice and Betty lay pensively studying the stars. While Betty evidently derived immense pleasure from taking in the awe-inspiring vastness of the universe, Alice was meditating on the extraordinary yet heart-warming sensation of enjoying another's presence without the awkward need to speak. In her opinion, the marvel was that there couldn't have been a more unlikely and opposite sort of character with which to share the silence than brash, brazen Betty Trucker.

Alice tried to formulate her cogitation into a silent prayer of thanks and attributed the whole phenomenon to a working of God's love. She turned her head, looked at Betty, and smiled. Betty smiled back and they returned to their silence.

"Man," Betty exclaimed shortly in a hushed tone, "when I look up at all of this, I realise what nothings we are."

"True," said Alice.

"How insignificant we are in the overall scheme of things," Betty continued. "Jes' specks of dust in infinity."

"I beg to differ, ma'am."

"In what way?"

"When I consider Thy heavens," quoted Alice, "the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained..."

"That's a psalm," said Betty.

"Exactly so, ma'am. I memorised it. 'What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that Thou visitest him?'

"For Thou hast made him just a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.' That's rather important, I would say.

"Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet: all sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field.' ..."

"Yup, baby," said Betty. "I'm getting your point. We are more important than we've been led to believe."

"That's what Brandon says," said Alice, and they both resumed their stargazing.

"It has been a mighty excitin' adventure, baby," Betty said at length. "I never thought that everyday events like eatin' at a diner, shoppin' at a boutique, checkin' in a motel, and even droppin' in at a church could be so full of surprises."

"Well, it's a bit like that all the time when we live by faith, ma'am. And this was truly a faith trip. It has been so much fun, to be sure."

“Huh?”

“For instance, when I go on a faith trip with Uncle Paul and Brandon and a couple of the senior teens, we venture out with hardly any money, not knowing what’s coming next, where we shall sleep that night, and all manner of suchlike uncertainties.”

“How do you get by?”

“We pray, obey the Lord, and claim keys. It’s a bit scary sometimes, but ever so exciting! The Lord always does it. We get people saved along the way, and we make lots of contacts and friends. I befriended ever such a nice flower vendor named Kathy on the street in Dublin last year, and now she’s a regular pen pal. I have an enormous list of e-mail pals, which I have a dreadful time to keep up with. Which reminds me, I need to get your contact details, ma’am.”

“Absolutely, Miss Alice. And we still need to take serious stock of your situation.”

“I know, ma’am. And I am ever so grateful that you have taken such good care of me! I’m really going to miss you.”

“Me too. I’m gonna miss you when it comes time fer you to move on. ...” Betty stopped and wiped her eyes. “My, I don’t remember blubberin’ so much, but I don’t remember laughin’ and everythin’ so much either. It’s been a wonderful time. Even meetin’ that crazy ol’ coot Quixote.”

“But don’t you *like* him, ma’am? At least as a friend?”

“I suppose I do,” said Betty with that merry laugh that Alice had vowed to solicit on their journey.

“You know, Alice. I’ve been thinking back about that there little sparkle in his eye when he handed me that dandelion bouquet. I know the restaurant guests were embarrassed, and I was a mite too, especially when he sang to me ... but you know, I’ve been thinkin’ ‘to hell with it,’ or as you would say, Alice, ‘to heaven with it.’ Who cares what people think of this guy? I realise now that I like him. ...”

I really like him, sang Alice.

“Is that a song?”

“Yes, ma’am. From the movie.

I like him, Alice continued singing.

I really like him.

Pluck me naked as a scalded chicken, I like him.

Don’t ask me for why or wherefore,

’Cause I don’t have a single good “because” or “therefore.”

*You can barbecue my nose.
Make a gible of my toes.
Make me freeze, make me fry.
Make me sigh, make me cry.
Still I'll yell to the sky,
Though I can't tell you why,
That I ... like him.*

“Well, some of the words *are* rather *special*, as Brandon would say.”

“But it’s cute,” said Betty. “And you sing it with such charm.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Anyway, it’s what his squire sings about Don Quixote to Dulcinea. I like him, I really like him.”

“Well, you’re right, Miss Alice. It’s taken awhile to admit it, even to myself, that I *really* like him.”

“That’s wonderful!” Alice exclaimed.

“Who’d be a-drivin’ out here at this time of night?” Betty said suddenly at the clanking rumble of an approaching vehicle.

“Well, speak o’ the Devil...,” said Betty, perceiving four silhouetted figures climbing out of a small car that had chugged to a halt behind Big Bertha.

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"SPEAK O' THE DEVIL"

It’s Don Quixote *himself!*” said Alice. “And who’s he with?”

Betty gasped. “Why, it’s *Ron* as well, Sancho Panza, and some girl dressed like you.”

“Deidre!” Alice shrieked, clambering out of her sleeping bag.

“Hey, we’d better git dressed,” said Betty, grabbing Alice’s arm.

“Looks like this night has only jes’ begun.”

Alice and Betty scrambled into their clothes just in time to greet and embrace their unexpected visitors.

“So they let you go?” Alice asked Deidre.

“I wanted to meet up with you again so bad, so I played the game.”

“What’s that?”

“You know. Acting how the asylum considered ‘normal’—cussing, giving off a selfish and stinky attitude, backtalking, and stuff, and they discharged me. Of course, all my friends knew that was the plan. They agreed that my presence was no longer needed when another ‘Alice’ showed up. Her parents had committed her. She was real sweet like you. Her name was ... er ... Tracy. ...”

“Tracy?” Alice exclaimed. “Tracy Sherman?”

“Yes, that’s it. She and I agreed that she should take up the ‘torch,’ so to speak. She did marvellously, and everyone loved her. Except Nurse Zauber, of course.”

“That’s wonderful!” said Alice. “I’ve really prayed for Tracy.”

“Anyway, my mom came and picked me up all pleased as a pig in ... er ... mud, and full of praise for the ‘excellent treatment’ at Buena Vista. Nice to know they were ‘only thinking of me.’ Either way, the staff was glad to get me off their hands. As soon as I got to my apartment, I changed back into these clothes and began making enquiries.”

“And the others? Nurse Faye?”

“Sweet as ever.”

“Mr. Dormas?”

“Sleeping as usual.”

“Marcus O’Hare?”

“He got a *New Millennium Exhaustive Thesaurus*, which is much too big for his pocket, so he wheels it around in a roller bag.”

“And dear old Mr. Hatter?”

“Well, after the inmates saw the terrific job that Mr. Hatter had done in making Don’s helmet,” said Deidre, “they *all* requested one. I must admit it *was* a work of art. News spread and then he went into a full-time business making helmets for the Weston Werewolves, the Varminton Vandals, and other baseball teams. He’s still getting orders.”

“I regret to say, a sad example of a traitor,” said Don Quixote, who had been standing aloof and stoic in the background. “Fashioning armour for the enemy. However, that is the corrupt way of warfare today.”

“Hey, come on, man,” said Ron. “It’s just a game.”

“Ron,” Deidre whispered, slipping her arm in his. “Do heed your tone.”

Don Quixote smiled knowingly. “And so it is, young sir, a game. For those who play at war no longer engage in it.”

“You should know, Rummy,” said Deidre. “You are signing up next year.”

“Oh *no*,” said Alice, breaking her sudden silence which had been drawing concerned glances from Betty. “You’re going off to war?”

“He is, babe,” said Betty. “But Ron was just talkin’ about baseball. What’s the big deal?”

“Well, Grandpa did say that sports is preparation for war.”

“True,” said Deidre. “Should see my dad watching sports. Like some bloodthirsty monster at the Roman games.”

“Hey, Alice, who is this ‘Grandpa’ you’re always talking about? Is he like some wise ol’ man o’ the mountain or something?”

“She can tell you all about him later, son,” said Betty. “But whadaya-say I turn up the Sterno and grill some hot dogs and buns from my travellin’ kitchen? Got some beers in the fridge—and cases of bubbly water for Alice, of course.”

The little gathering responded with excited sounds of agreement at this suggestion, and Betty and Deidre bustled about setting up the activity’s necessary paraphernalia. Alice was about to offer her assistance, when Ron called her over.

“Need to talk.”

Alice nodded and followed him into a darkened brush area a short way off.

“You read my note?”

Alice nodded again.

“What did you think?”

Alice shrugged morosely.

“It’s that obvious?”

“What is?”

“Me and ... you know...”

Alice bit her lip and stared at the stars. Ron nervously continued.

“W-well, when Mom called me in L.A. and told me you’d been taken in, I *freaked*, but I was right in the middle of an important shoot and as soon as I could, I headed back down to Weston pronto. Somehow, I got to the Buena Vista place late. You’d already left with mom. Anyway, that’s where I met...”

“Deidre,” Alice said coldly, but then felt the key ring burning in her pocket.

“Yeah, Deidre. You see, we got to talking and stuff. ... I don’t really remember how it all played out, but...”

“It’s God’s will, Rummy,” said Alice, fighting to hold back tears. “I committed you to Jesus, and it seems He answered my prayers.”

“I guess He did,” said Ron, kicking his feet in the sand. “Me and Dee wanted to see you real bad, and we thought it only fair to tell you and stuff. She says you’re the best friend she’s ever had in the whole world.”

“Vex not yourself, Rummy,” said Alice, taking his hand. “I knew it wasn’t meant to be right now in this...”

“Dimension,” said Ron and grinned. “You don’t belong here, and I can’t be more than a playing card to you. ...”

“*What?* How ever did you...”

“Deidre clued me in, Princess. The playing cards, and all that. You see, Tracy Sherman gave that book to Dee before she left. I read it too, and it’s okay. I’ve dealt with it. Fantastic read, by the way.”

Alice burst into tears and Ron took her into his arms.

“Why does it have to be like this?” she sobbed into his shirt. “First with the cards and now this. It just hurts too much.”

“You’re obviously not asking *me* right now,” said Ron. “So I’ll just let *Him* answer you.”

At the sudden rustling of underbrush, Alice drew away from Ron. Someone was approaching.

“Hi, Dee,” said Ron.

Deirdre nodded, and her sheepishly apologetic eyes met Alice’s. “I suppose he told you...”

“In so many words,” said Alice. “It just wasn’t meant to be. Me and him, I mean...”

“I suppose so,” said Deirdre. “What with you coming from a past century...”

“But I *haven’t*, Deirdre.”

“Hot dogs are a-waitin’, guys! Come ’n’ git ’em!”

At Betty’s call, the three youngsters gathered their composure.

“Look,” Alice whispered, “let’s not spoil this time together, because I feel that I may not be around too much...”

“Ooh,” Deirdre said with a shiver. “That sounds *portentous!*”

“Sancho’s crackin’ open the suds,” said Betty, once Alice, Ron, and Deirdre had joined her. “Donny is taking vigil over there, and he will join us shortly.”

“Donny?” said Alice.

Betty blushed. “Oh ... er ... Mr. Quixote.”

Suddenly, “Donny” strode up with a serious, almost challenging expression, and his sword drawn. The others, munching on hot dogs sat up in alarm and Betty sprang to her feet.

“This is it,” she said, grimly. “He’s *lost* it!”

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A NIGHT OF KNIGHTS

Sit thee down, fair Dulcinea and fear not,” said Don Quixote, and with a bow he presented his sword to Alice.

“Your Majesty, I pray that ye would partake in a ceremony.”

“I do so love ceremonies,” said Alice. “Especially weddings. Brandon can’t stand ceremonies, though.”

“This is an honour that I wish for thee to bestow upon us before thou takest thy leave, Your Majesty.”

“Taking her leave?” said Betty. “Jes’ exactly what are we talkin’ ’bout here?”

“Thou shalt see, milady. But suffer it to be that Queen Alice shouldst bestow the honour of knight errant upon Sir Ron and his lady, Deirdre Dudley.”

“Look, Alice,” said Deirdre, “you don’t have to play along with this. We can explain to Mr. Quixote.”

“Very well, Sir Quixote,” said Alice, lifting her head and steeling her chin, “I shall. Sir Ronald Trucker and Lady Deirdre Dudley, kneel before us.”

Ron and Deirdre looked at each other, shrugged, and did as Alice commanded.

“Got more hot dogs, if anybody’s interested,” said Betty.

Sancho, who had been sitting silently off to the side, jumped to his feet and took advantage of Betty’s offer.

“There’s more cold beer, too,” she announced.

Meanwhile, Alice began to speak, adapting the proclamation from a knighting ceremony she had read in a book to the best of her remembrance. “Ronald Trucker, son of Elizabeth Trucker, you have proved by trial of combat with the evil forces that you are worthy of the mantle of knighthood. Do you hereby swear to uphold the Law of Love, to protect those in need, to abhor those of dark heart, to treat women with respect, and to put your faith in the blessed Lord of Hosts?”

A deep silence followed. Ron was wide eyed and speechless.

“I do so swear, babe,” Deidre whispered to Ron. “Say it.”

With a nod, Ron mumbled, “I do so swear.”

“I, Queen Alice the ... er ... Second?” she softly inquired, looking at Don Quixote.

“The First,” Deirdre said under her breath.

“The Second,” said Don Quixote. “Take my word for it.”

“Of course. And so,” Alice continued, “I, Queen Alice the Second do hereby dub thee Sir Ronald, Knight of...”

Alice turned to Betty. “Where does he live?”

“Trailer City,” said Ron.

“Knight of Trailer City!”

So saying, Alice laid the sword’s rusty blade first upon Ron’s right shoulder, and then upon his left and once more upon his right.

“Arise, Sir Rummy. Oh, I’m most awfully sorry—I mean Sir *Ronald*, and claim the accolades that are your right.”

Ron turned and met hearty applause from the others.

“This is *cool*,” he whispered to Deirdre. “Like a *genuine* English Middle Ages thingy.”

“And thou, Deirdre Dudley, I do now pronounce thee his lady.”

“And if I may, Your Majesty,” said Don Quixote, “I would like to take this opportunity to announce something of chief importance in

this our feast of the Order of the Key Ring. Namely my declaration of engagement to Lady Dulcinea.”

Betty gasped and put her hand to her mouth. Alice knelt at her side.

“Does it come as a surprise, ma’am?” she whispered.

“I guess not, baby. But what do you think? I mean he’s clearly *crazy*...”

“Do you love him?”

“It’s nuts, Alice, honey, but I guess I do.”

“Then go on up,” Alice said with a smile.

“It’s awesome that we’re all here!” said Ron. “It’s kind of weird in a good way. Know what I mean?” he added, looking at Alice.

“Yes, Sir Ronald. Thank You, Lord. There’s a connection, a reason why we met—you, me, Deidre, Don Quixote ... and even Secor Panza,” she added, pointing to Sancho Panza, who had fallen asleep in the brush, nursing an almost empty bottle of tequila. “There was a purpose for my ... I suppose I have to call it a *mission*. A reason why I was dropped off here.

“However, I do not claim to have all the answers as to the omniscient purpose behind such a strange and awesome meeting of souls. But I will venture to say this, that by the grace of Jesus, it is fulfilling a plan that surpasses our feeble and natural understanding. Oh, Miss Trucker, I know that you are a ... what do they say today? ... a ‘key player’ in the divine orchestration of our meeting. ...”

Alice paused and asked for a tissue. “I’m sorry,” she said. “This is quite an emotional time for me.”

“I understand, Your Majesty,” said Don Quixote, and produced a tissue from his breastplate. “But the tears of a Queen are stored in a heavenly vial. Didst thou not know?”

“I read something about that, sir.”

“Hey,” said Betty. “I hope that is not the tissue I gave you at the restaurant, Mr. Quixote.”

“Would it be any other, milady?” he asked.

“Alice,” said Betty. “*Please*.”

Alice was oblivious. She wiped her eyes with Don Quixote’s tendered tissue and continued.

“I would that we all thank our Heavenly Father and His Son for the blessings of...”

Don Quixote suddenly began singing,

*God bless our gracious queen,
God bless our noble queen.*

*God bless our queen.
Keep her victorious,*

“By Jesus’ grace,” Alice blushing interjected.

*Happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us.
God bless our queen.*

Alice threw her head back and sighed. “I want to go home, Jesus,” she whispered. “My mission is done. *Please*, I want to go home.”

Suddenly, as the gathering rather awkwardly closed their eyes, and at Alice’s behest began sincerely thanking God for various aspects of their recent adventures, a bright light engulfed them.

“Oh no,” said Betty, shielding her opened eyes. “Police floodlights!”

“I knew they’d catch up with me,” said Deidre.

“But look,” said Ron. “It’s coming from up in the sky!”

“And what’s that far-out jingling sound?” Deidre asked.

Betty fell to her knees as she gazed at the sky in awe. A golden circular vehicle was hovering above them.

“It’s the key craft!” Alice exclaimed.

“It looks exactly like what you described, Alice,” said Betty. “With all those keys and that flashing dome in the middle!”

“At last you get to see a genuine UFO, ma’am!” said Alice.

Suddenly, a pair of male and female beings who looked as though they were composed of fiery liquid gold stepped out of the craft. They each bore a pair of keys embedded in their chest.

“Tola, Tor!” Alice exclaimed.

The female being floated down to the group and reached out to Alice.

“It’s time to return home,” she said.

“Right now, ma’am, this very minute?”

“Yes, Alice. Take my hand.”

“But do you *have* to leave us?” Deirdre wailed.

“You have a job, Deirdre, a very important job. And Sir Ron is the perfect one to stand by your side. My prayers are with you and your commission.”

Looking up at Tola, the female being, Alice reached into her pocket and pulled out her key ring. “May I leave these with my friends as a gift?”

“You may,” Tola gently responded.

“Who shall I give them to?”

Tola looked questioningly up at Tor, the male being.

“Her,” he replied, pointing to Betty who was still on her knees and gazing up, enraptured. “Give them to Betty Trucker. She will use them wisely.”

Amidst tearful waves of goodbye, Tola drew Alice up into a door on the underside of the key craft.

“Hold on tight,” said Tor. “You know how it is when we get ready to take off. ...”

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EPILIQUE

And the young lady’s seatbelt is fastened?”
Alice slowly opened her eyes and took a drowsy double take at an airplane stewardess leaning over her.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am?” Alice asked.

“She’s making sure our seatbelts are fastened,” said Brandon. “And our seats are in the upright position.”

“Yes, miss,” said the stewardess. “We’re preparing for landing. ... Excuse me, but do I know you?”

“I must confess, I was pondering the same thing, ma’am. Your name wouldn’t happen to be ... umm ... ‘Twinkie,’ by any chance?”

The hostess gasped. “That is amazing! No one has called me that since I was ... oh ... a little girl! How on earth would you know that?”

“On earth it would be impossible, ma’am. It takes a trip to another ... oh my goodness gracious, I am ever so sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” said the stewardess. “Although I can’t for the life of me think of what you’re apologising for. I think it’s charming to have met you.”

“Charming to have met you too, ma’am, to be sure,” said Alice.

“So you have visited the U.S. before?”

“Well, I have taken a couple of trips to the Useless...” Alice began and then shook her head. “No, not really.”

“Oh?” said the stewardess. “I could have sworn I met you on a trip over here. Your name wouldn’t be Deidre by any chance?”

Alice gasped. “Er ... no, ma’am. But she is ... my name is Alice.”

The stewardess gasped also and put her hand to her mouth. “Alice! Alice *Godley*?”

Alice nodded.

“So *you* were the one eligible for our ‘Flight of Fancy’ upgrade!”

“I know of no such thing, ma’am.”

“It must be on your boarding pass, miss. Check the stub.”

Alice reached into the back pocket of her jeans. “Oh *yes*, Air Rhombus ‘Flight of Fancy’ upgrade. I didn’t even notice. Did that mean I was supposed to get a special seat, like business class?”

“Not exactly. Tell me, did anything unusual happen during your flight, Miss Godley?”

“Well,” Alice began, “I suppose it did. But...”

“This whole trip is a first for all of us,” said Brandon. “Our parents included.”

“I understand,” said the stewardess. “But you have friends there? Staying with relatives?”

“Staying with Mum’s parents, actually,” said Brandon. “They had been inviting us for awhile, but being missionaries, we couldn’t afford it for all of us until the president of your Rhombus airline company sponsored our tickets.”

“That’s kind of him. Mr. Cole is a noble man. Well, I must excuse myself and attend to the landing procedures. A pleasure to have met you both.”

“To be sure, the pleasure is ours, ma’am,” said Alice. “I do hope we can meet again.”

“That would be wonderful, miss,” the stewardess said and handed Alice a business card.

“Do have a nice stay in the Useless Status,” she added and trotted off down the aisle.

Brandon turned to Alice and chuckled. “That’s a good one. ‘Useless Status.’ I suppose she must be a rebel at heart. We should give her a tract.”

“Curiouser and curiouser!” Alice was saying, shaking her head. “I do so hope that this is not another dream in a dream—it gets ever so awfully confusing.”

“Listen, sis. Can I mention that it’s a bit *bizarre* to wake you up sometimes, and you’re doing this Jane Austen lingo thing?”

“I imagine it is somewhat perturbing, dear Brandon. I do beg your pardon.”

“And did you know you slept the whole flight?”

“Apparently,” said Alice.

“Yah. Tried to wake you up for the meal and the in-flight movie and it was like, no way. For instance, when they came around with the meal, you opened your eyes for a moment, looked at the food and said you wanted chips and not crisps—neither of which were on the plate. You were dreaming apparently, Alice.”

Alice smiled. “*Apparently*.”

The End