

# TO THE MOON, ALICE

Julia Mahon

*Bright Alice always pondering to gloze  
The spoiled cruelty she had meant to say  
Gazes learnedly down her nose  
At nothing, nothing thinking all the day*  
— from "The Last Days of Alice"  
by Allen Tate

Doc, I just don't know what to do with her anymore. It come on her kind of gradual, you know? Last fall it was no supper on the table one night when she usually put it out right at five. Then I noticed that she left off washing her hair every day. She quit shaving her legs, too. She always kept herself up real nice before, but look at her! There's a good-looking lady there but you wouldn't know it now, would you, Doc? And then the thing with the kids. Not letting them out the door some days for fear they'd get run over by a car. Alice, I said, that's silly. Kids got to run. But, no, she won't have that, so she locks all the doors and plays Bingo with them and reads them "Through The Looking Glass" for hours on end.

Maybe it started at the company picnic. I don't know. It was a lot of small things at first, Doc, so I didn't make much of it. I've got to be honest. Nine years we've been married and I knew Alice was loco in la cabasa. But loco in a nice sort of way. Like when we were dating we'd always have to stop at the park on our way home so she could go on the swing. Every night there we'd be, me watching her go back and forth, higher and higher, and her trying to touch the sky. She'd exasperate me no end with this swinging business every night and I'd shake my fist at her up there sailing and I'd yell, "To the moon, Alice!" — God I loved that show with Jackie Gleason and the Honeymooners — and she'd yell down, "I'm trying Bert. I'm trying." She was looney like that all the time, but she wasn't really crazy, Doc. My family thought she was though. They didn't want me to marry her. I bet they're all thinking I-told-you-so now.

She stopped talking altogether two months ago. No. Not a word. She just sits at the kitchen table turning her wedding ring round and round on her finger. She's got the skin all raw and bleeding on that finger. Look, Doc. She's doing it now. What do you make of it? Sometimes I think she's got me crazy, Doc. I mean, I imagine things. I look at her face and I swear she's talking to me, but her lips aren't moving and there's no sound coming out. She's saying she hates me. I hear her, but not with my ears, you know? I can't take it, Doc. I've got a good job at the plant. I'm a line supervisor and I work hard, but this business with Alice is ruining me. A man expects a clean house and dinner on the table and a little affection. I mean, is that too much to ask for? God bless the kids, though. They're helping all they can.

What did you say? What kind of mother was she? Well, I don't know how to describe that, Doc. She was, well, she was different. When they were babies she'd put them in this kind of sack in front of her and carry them around that way while she dusted or did up the supper. She'd talk to them about peculiar things. What? Well like did they think carrots had a conscience, and do fruit flies mind only living for a day. She'd kiss the kids and ask them did they know that God loves them. Silly stuff. Jesus, she talked all the time then. The kids would smile up at her like they understood every word she was saying.

She wouldn't spank them either. We'd argue about that all the time. I told her she was wrong not to swat them good once in a while. Kids need it I think, don't you? Anyway, we'd yell about it and she'd say it's parents who need to be spanked by kids. Who ever heard of such a thing? But she had an unhappy childhood, I think, so I didn't push the issue. We also argued about teaching them, uh private things. You know, the birds and the bees stuff. One day the kids got a hold of some girlie magazines that I keep under the bed. I came home from work

and there's Alice with the three of them on her lap looking at the naked pictures as if it was Mother Goose story hour. I hit the roof, let me tell you. I called her a damn pervert for letting them see that kind of trash. She said she was showing them the pictures so they wouldn't be perverts when they grew up. Looney, I tell you. Just pure looney.

And, Doc, sometimes she'd walk around the house without any clothes on. Our boys were seven and five years old! That made me mad. I mean if it was just me, well okay, if the shades were drawn. Well you're a doc, Doc. You know. She had a nice shape before she quit eating. And, Doc, don't write this down, but she'd . . . she'd let the kids, you know, uh, play with themselves. She wouldn't smack their hands or anything. She'd just say, "Bet that feels good." I think she wasn't right in the head then, now that I think about it.

One hot night she took the kids into the doughboy pool I put up for the summer. It was dark out and they were splashing around while I was in the garage changing the oil. The next thing I know all four of them are giggling and screeching and they've got no swimsuits on. Not a stitch. Alice either. I pulled the kids out by their hair and wrapped them in towels. Alice ignored me while she did a back float. I could see all of her grinning at me in the moonlight. Shit, I was mad. I grabbed her by the hair too, and Doc, I think I was right to do this — I smacked her up the side of her head to try to knock some sense into her. You know what she did? She grinned at me again, then shook her ass in my face! Then she got into the car stark naked and drove around the block. I'm telling you all these things even though it's embarrassing for me, Doc. I want you to cure her so she'll be normal like other women are.

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One reason my family didn't like Alice is because she's not a church-goer. I knew that would be a problem because they are pretty set Baptists. But I thought I could convert her. You know, set a good example and all that. One Sunday, about a year after we'd been married, I thought I'd see if I could get her to come to church with me. I set the alarm an hour early. I made love to Alice good so that I could have the edge. She was always generous after she got laid. "Alice," I said, "let's go to church."

"Where do you think we've just been?" she said to me.

Friends? Sure we've got friends, but we haven't seen any of them in a long time. Not since Alice started with the Greta Garbo act. Some of the guys from the plant used to come over with their wives and we'd play cards, have a few beers. That kind of stuff. Alice used to be a great hostess. She'd make the most delicious hors d'oeuvres. There was this one I remember with crab meat. The girls would all want the recipe. She'd talk about babies and Tupperware just like a normal woman. I was so proud of her then. She was nice to the fellas, too. Nice in the way that she'd really listen to them even when they were shooting shit, like everything they said was pearls of wisdom. It was sexy the way she listened to them, like she used her whole body not only her ears. I always had to have her on those Saturday nights after the company left. The guys thought I was a lucky man. Am I a lucky man, Doc? Look at her. Do you think I'm lucky?

One night we had some of our friends over to the house. Alice didn't like beer so I bought her some Southern Comfort and Coke. Well, we quit playing cards and we were getting into some good discussions about labor unions and baseball and the economic situation, you know, the usual, when I noticed that Alice had finished off the half pint of whiskey. She had a kind of far-away look about her. Not boredom like she was sick of our talk, but there was some lighted-up look on her face as if she was listening to a different conversation. It was embarrassing for me. Everybody else noticed too. I know why they call liquor spirits, Doc. All you had to do was look at her eyes. Then she kind of snapped out of it. With nobody asking, she said she wanted to start a new religion. A new religion! God! We weren't even ever talking about religion! I said, "Shut up Alice. You're drunk," but she just kept on about how in her church the only rule was there would be no rules and the only sin would be the failure to love, and on and on. My friends kept looking at me like who had put a nickel in her machine. "To

the moon, Alice," I said, joking, but really meaning it. I wanted to smack her. I went to get everybody another beer but because of her stupid talk they all wanted to leave. When we went to bed that night I didn't touch her. I was that mad. She turned to me and said, "You know, Bert, sometimes I'm more lonely with people than I am just without them." So yeh, Doc, we had friends. Past tense, if you know what I mean.

She had her own friends too, but I didn't like any of them much. They all reminded me of people that are in foreign films. There was the Israeli girl who was living with a married couple down the block and ready any day to have the host husband's baby. Alice helped with the delivery at their house. I had to cook my own dinner that night. Then there was her girlfriend who was in love with a married doctor. That one slashed her wrists about once a month, then she'd call Alice in the middle of the night to come help bandage her up. She had one man friend who wasn't really a man. You get my meaning? He taught her how to cook cannelloni. She made me so damn much of it that I had cannelloni coming out of my ears by the end of a week.

And get this. One night during dinner Alice got a call from some neighbors who go to my church. They don't even like Alice. They asked her what they should do for their dog that ate five pounds of chicken bones. She said that he probably needs an enema and, I couldn't believe this one, over she marched to give him one. The damn dog was in love with her after that. He wouldn't leave her side for weeks. It's things like that, Doc, that worried me about her. Like she was the neighborhood witch-doctor or something. So I put my foot down. Alice, I said, you've got me and the kids to keep you busy. Enough of this running around seeing to everybody else. So, Doc, I answered the phone all the time after that so she wouldn't have to be bothered.

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Well, no, I don't feel uncomfortable talking about that. But it's not that important even though you shrinks are making a mint off books about it. It's a private thing between two people. I don't want anyone getting off on my love life, no offense to you, Doc. Let's just say she was tireless. Alice never had a headache. She even let me have it before we were married. I was nervous. I could of waited and I told her so, but no, she says she wants to try the shoe on to see if it fits. I thought of boxes and boxes of opened shoes. But the thing is, her being open like that didn't make me want her less. She wasn't like any girl I'd ever met. I think now that I married her hoping I could catch some of that crazy, maybe belong better to the earth like she did. I was dead wrong. Look at her, Doc. Looks like she's left the earth now, doesn't it?

What? Like it? Don't be a jerk, Doc. Making love with Alice was like being in a jazz band and she knows how to play all the instruments. Lately? No. Not at all. Not since the picnic which I still have to tell you about. She just kind of lost all interest.

Last September the owner of the company I work for decided to let the moths out of his wallet and give us a company picnic. I was excited about it because I've been a line supervisor for a long time and never got to mingle with the higher-ups. Anyway, Alice dressed the kids like we had money, but weren't sissies. The two boys wore summer shirts and shorts that showed how muscular and tan they were. For our daughter, Alice sewed up a short set made out of polka-dotted Swiss and put a lily in her dark hair. Alice herself, you should have been there Doc, looked like she stepped out of a poster of faraway places. She made herself a pantsuit, but not like anything polyester from a store. It looked like she took a linen tablecloth that was a little yellow and tore at the edges, and turned it into a jacket that was open down to her navel. The pants she made never covered the legs of a table so nicely. She took a brown bandana and tied up her bosoms so they weren't hanging out, but you'd think they might any minute. I didn't like that at all, but I've got to admit it was pretty. I felt real proud of my family.

The picnic went fine. The kids ran all over the park. There was lots of beer and food. I played horseshoes with one of the company executives as my partner. He told me that they had their eye on me for a promotion. He was a swell guy. Him and I kept drinking and blow-

ing away all the challengers. What a day it was. Alice was behaving herself, too. Talking to the other wives. Passing paper plates around. My partner and I took a break from the game so I looked around for Alice. I wanted to tell her what the bigwig said. When I found her she kept interrupting me.

"Listen, Alice, this executive told me . . ."

"Bert, the owner keeps trying to . . ."

"And I might be moved up to . . ."

"BERT! LISTEN TO ME! The owner of your company keeps trying to grab me."

"What? Don't be stupid, Alice. He's an old man."

"Let's leave, Bert. He keeps following me around."

"Alice, you're imagining things. Be nice to the old guy."

"Don't pimp me, Bert."

"To the moon, Alice."

It served Alice right for wearing that outfit, I thought, Doc, though I didn't for a minute think the old man was trying to hit on her. What an imagination. Well, I found my partner and I swear the more beer we drank, the better we got at shoes. We were in a close match. I was last up in a tied game. I threw out of my mind, three ringers in a row! My partner started jumping up and down, hugging me, and everyone was clapping. I wanted Alice to see this so bad. I looked around for her. She was standing in a spot of sunlight laughing at the kids hopping by in sacks. Just at the moment I saw my boss sneak up in front of her and grab the front of her jacket. Doc, it was like the whole world turned silent. I saw things in slow motion, you know? Alice slowly slipping away from him; the brown bandana fluttering in the old man's hand; Alice gracefully bringing her knee up into his groin and him falling down so damn slowly to the ground.

I wanted to kill her. She blew my chance at that promotion, Doc. When we got home she put the kids to bed. I had another beer. She must of heard the beer top pop, so she yelled from our bedroom, "Haven't you had enough, Bert?" I tell you my scalp started tingling. The muscles in my gut tightened. I kicked the bedroom door and the doorknob crashed into the plasterboard wall leaving a gaping hole.

"Yeh, I've had enough, Alice. I've had enough of you, you crazy broad. What were you thinking of, kicking my boss like that? Are you off your head, woman?"

"What did you want me to do? Screw him so you could get promoted? Did you, Bert? Did you?"

I grabbed her arms and held them hard behind her back.

"Why not, Alice? You love it so much. And I don't do it for you. Do I? Do I?" I said shaking her.

I threw her down on her bed. Then she did the one thing she shouldn't of, Doc. She smiled at me. Her teeth gleamed so damn white in the moonlight coming through the window. That grin unhinged me. I saw in her smile all her easiness with people, all her brightness, all her knowing ways. And I saw me there too, as she must of seen me, real small, real mean, real stupid. I hated her for that smile. I wanted to rub it out and at the same time rub out the sight she gave me of myself. I tore at her clothes. When she tried to get away from me I pinned her down. There was a roaring noise in my head. I kneed her legs apart. I tore into her and into her and into her. God help me, Doc, I didn't mean to do it. How can you hate so much someone you love so much? How can you hurt so bad someone who heals you so good? Are there books about that, Doc? Are there?

Alice wasn't smiling anymore. She was real still. When I thought to look at her, she was staring at me but her eyes glistened in a spooky way like she was gone somewhere else. I was breaking her, Doc, driving whatever was her own self out of her body and I knew I was, but I couldn't stop it. Alice turned her head to look out the window, anywhere away from me, and a beam of light shined on her face showing me her powerless, deflated eyes. It was like she'd flown out the window and was gone to a faraway place where I couldn't hurt her no more.

God help me, I didn't want this, but always with her I felt shriveled and of no account. I don't know why she stayed with me. She lived her life so damn well without my help. Can you understand how that power in a woman does in a man, Doc? But, Doc, believe me, I loved her then and I still do, even after everything; only looking back like this with you, I think I've got a better handle on me and Alice. I didn't make her get so dead-like, did I, Doc? Doc? It wasn't my fault was it? Wasn't it her all along? Say you can fix her, Doc. Can't you zap some electricity through her head so maybe she won't remember some things too good? So maybe she'll be more normal than she ever was? More like I'd like her to be? Can't you, Doc?



Mary

Jacqueline R. Carlson