

## Alice

Even though Alice always intended to get dressed, she didn't, for the first three days following the funeral, but stayed in her pajamas, housecoat and slippers. When hungry, she ate what she could find as long as it didn't require much preparation. It didn't seem worth it, to fix anything, when she'd only eat a few bites anyway. She drank tea. Pot after pot.

At five o'clock on the second day she made herself a manhattan. Every day at five, she and her husband had cocktails, before dinner. He always made them, and she realized she didn't really know how he'd done it. She sipped it, but it didn't taste right, and she looked over at his chair, where he should have been, to tell him. Oh. Yes, that's right. He's gone now. He'd never sit in that chair again.

The phone rang but she didn't answer, unless it was someone in the immediate family, and listened to his voice on the answering machine that he'd recorded months ago, back when life was normal. Over and over she heard it. "Hello, you've reached the Thurmans. We're not able to take your call right now..." No. We're out somewhere, shopping, or visiting, or maybe we're on a trip. We can't take your call.

She'd have to change that message. Not yet, but soon. She'd be ready soon. But when she did, when she hit the save button, his voice would be gone forever. Not yet. One more time. She'd listen to it one more time.

The fourth day was different. She showered and washed and dried her hair, put on a pair of sweats. She didn't go out of the house all day but went through the refrigerator and cleaned out all the things that had gone bad during the past week and salvaged what she could. She warmed some of the casserole her neighbor Isabelle had brought over, for her lunch and dinner.

On the fifth day, Alice made herself a small breakfast and noticed that the counters needed cleaning. Once started, she cleaned everything, cupboards, drawers, the pantry, throwing things out that she knew she would never use, like the olives George had put in his martinis.

The next day she went to the grocery store, her first time out. She moved through the aisles, picking things up by rote and then remembering, and putting some of the items back on the shelves. She would have to develop a whole new way now. She didn't know how to cook for just one person, so she bought half as much of everything.

She cleaned and organized the rest of the rooms, taking only a half-hour to make her lunch, working her way through the downstairs and then upstairs to tackle the hard part, George's office and his closet, his dresser and his things in the bathroom. When she put his personal items from the bathroom in the trash bag, she wept for the first time. There was something so final about throwing away his comb, his toothbrush.

Once started, it seemed she couldn't stop. She cried all the time, and only when her head ached, and her eyes felt as if they would swell shut, did she quit. The slightest thing could set her off, the voice of Geo on the phone, who sounded so much like his father, a random memory, or a sympathy card received in the mail.

She cried on her bed in the afternoons, falling into a deep troubled sleep that lasted for hours, and left her feeling drugged and sluggish when she woke. Most times she dragged herself down the stairs, to find something to eat, or watch the news on TV, but occasionally she just stayed right there in the bed, pulling the covers up around her head until morning.

She thought it odd that it had taken several days for it to happen. Later she would come to realize that grief comes in stages, and she hadn't been in that period of acceptance yet, which is when the really hard time comes. It had taken the act of throwing away a toothbrush to get there.

The first signs of spring appeared in March, the sound of snow melting steadily all day, the sunshine a little brighter than the thin light of winter, and still she cried most of the day. In late March, it became unseasonably warm one afternoon and she opened a window and heard a bird. It was the most wonderful sound, the sound of a new season, and she marveled at the beauty of it. She stood listening for a long time and thought how, if George were there, they would be celebrating the first signs of spring together. But she didn't cry. It was the first time in weeks that she had been able to think about him without crying.

She changed the message on the answering machine. "We are not able to take your phone call right now." She re-recorded the message, "I am not able to take your phone call right now."

Friends called and invited her to their homes, though she didn't go often. She went to her sons' houses for dinner once a week because they picked her up and brought her back. She didn't like to drive in the dark. George had always done that.

By the start of summer, the friends they'd had together, couples they had socialized with and vacationed with for decades, called less often. Their lives went on, with one less couple in the group.

One afternoon, while out in her backyard, Isabelle called over and asked if she would come to a dinner party the following Saturday. Alice, surprised by the invitation since she and George had never socialized with Isabelle and her husband, said yes without thinking. Afterwards, she was apprehensive that she had accepted, since she didn't know what to expect.

But she went, at the appointed time, bottle of wine in hand.

Isabelle and her husband were a bit eccentric. Isabelle wore long flowing, dresses, low-cut to reveal a deep cleavage and she especially liked turquoise jewelry. Her husband, Hal, was a quiet, bemused man, who seemed lost in deep thoughts, and observed his wife's effervescence. Isabelle was never at a loss for words.

Hal seemed proud of Isabelle and her accomplishments. "She just makes up her mind about things," he told Alice, "and I pretty much go along with whatever she says because she is always right." He smiled and it was clear to Alice that Hal adored his wife, even though they seemed very different.

Another couple had been invited to the dinner party, as well as Isabelle's Aunt Betty. The couple, Winston and Roxanne, were both dressed oddly, he wore black jeans with an oversized tie-dyed shirt, while she had on a red peasant dress, with a pattern of small bouquets of flowers, and white frilly lace at the neck, something popular twenty years before. She wore her graying hair in a single braid which hung halfway down her back. She was not to be called "Roxy", she said.

Isabelle settled the guests in chairs on the deck, and offered refreshments. Winston and Roxanne were undecided what to drink, as they did not want anything too sweet, or with additives, or preservatives. It had to be something natural, and must not be carbonated. Alice thought it odd since they were mixing it with alcohol. If they were so health-conscious, why would they drink alcohol at all?

They settled on cranberry juice with vodka, after learning that it wasn't the cranberry cocktail kind but "100% Real Juice". Alice and Aunt Betty decided on the white wine Alice had brought. Winston said wine had "too many nitrates". Alice figured she must be full of nitrates,

since she enjoyed a glass of wine with dinner most evenings. Luckily, it hadn't seemed to do her any real harm yet.

Winston and Roxanne settled in with their drinks and monopolized the conversation, while Isabelle bustled in and out, making dinner preparations. Hal sipped his manhattan and nodded.

Isabelle and Hal did not believe in such things as mulch or fertilizers. Rather, they let things grow wild and decided they preferred it, Isabelle said. Winston and Roxanne commented on the beauty of "the grounds", that they so much preferred a "natural setting". Alice also felt there was beauty in a natural setting, but Isabelle and Hal's yard might be beyond that.

Winston told the story of his brother, who was in jail. The brother's live-in girlfriend, with whom he had two children, had recently taken up with a third brother and married him, all while the father of the children languished in jail for petty offenses, that of writing bad checks and being caught with marijuana in his car.

Roxanne made strange facial expressions while Winston told the story. She looked haughty, or amused, or surprised, as he expounded. When Winston described the family reunion, to which the other brother brought his now-wife, mother of the children of the brother in jail, Roxanne sat back and fluttered her lashes through half-closed eyes. She puckered her lips in a smirk and her shoulders shook with exasperated silent giggles at the improbability of it all.

Alice sat back in her chair, dumbfounded that this conversation was taking place at all, and that anyone would talk about it if it had actually happened in their family. Aunt Betty leaned in. "It sounds like something you'd hear on the Jerry Springer Show," she whispered. Alice folded her lips in tightly to keep from laughing outright.

As the evening wore on, Alice noticed that both Winston and Roxanne seemed to ignore the dangers of nitrates, as they drank glass after glass of wine both during and after dinner. The more wine they drank, the more they boasted about their artistic talents, about this art show and that. Winston was a wood sculptor and Roxanne was a weaver.

Finally, when Winston launched into another boring story, "When we did the Corn Hill Art Show in Rochester last summer..." Alice jumped up to help Isabelle clear the plates so dessert could be served. She wasn't accustomed to this type of dinner party, where people discussed subjects and events not everyone was interested in.

After dessert, Isabelle served coffee on the deck and Alice became better acquainted with Betty, who was also a widow. The two women had quite a bit in common, they discovered, as they described their families, their husbands, the death of those husbands, and their own feelings about it and how they coped. When the evening ended, Alice was a little disappointed. She had enjoyed talking with Betty and as they said goodbye, how nice to have met you, Betty asked for Alice's phone number.

Betty called every few days to see how Alice was getting on. Alice called Betty too, especially in the hour before dinner, which she found so difficult. That had been the time when she and George had a drink together, and shared the events of the day, or discussed a member of the family, or decided what needed to be done around the house, or made plans for a shopping trip. Those small intimate conversations, about not much of anything, were what Alice missed the most. When it happened, she poured herself a glass of wine, called Betty and talked to her about how she was missing George at that moment. Betty didn't urge her to "cheer up" or tell her that "it would get easier" or "things would look up". Instead, she let Alice wallow in her grief, and cry if she needed to.

Sometimes, Alice and Betty went to lunch or an early dinner. They had their meal, and lingered on, talked about losing a loved one, how it changed things, how it was such a life-altering event, and how they had been so ill-prepared. Alice thought Isabelle had been wise enough to know that a friend like Betty might be just what she needed. She would be grateful to Isabelle for that. Hal was right, everything Isabelle tried seemed to work out for the best.

Alice had neglected her garden that spring and took trips to the nursery to get the annual flowers she loved, begonias and impatiens. They were mostly picked over, which made her feel protective, as if she could take the orphan plants that no one had chosen and bring them to life. She thought maybe next year she'd make some changes in the garden, but not yet, since she was getting a late start and it was already hot. July arrived, and Alice spent a good part of each morning in the flower garden, before it got too warm. George had been gone for five months.

She spent the summer quietly, except for her outings with Betty. Most days were spent at home alone. The condolence phone calls had stopped now. Alice noticed that she was not included in activities to which formerly, she and George would have been invited. She didn't mind that. It would probably have made her feel quite sad to be with the people who were his friends with him not there. She understood that this was something that happened normally. It wasn't that there was a reason they didn't want to see her, it was that they were used to doing things as couples. George was the first of the group to die.

She talked to Betty about this turn of events and Betty assured her that the same thing had happened to her. "It makes them uncomfortable to have you around," Betty said. "That's why widows naturally gravitate towards one another."

Alice considered this and found it to be perfectly understandable. People who had not gone through it could not know how it felt. They only knew how it made *them* feel, and it didn't feel right. She was saddened that it was so, but held no grudge against her former friends.

She now had a new routine, or rather lack of one. As she sat on the sun porch with her wine and newspaper one evening, while warming a bowl of corn chowder for a light supper, she thought about how she would never have served corn chowder as a meal for herself and George. He would have wanted more than that, meat, potatoes, vegetable, salad and dessert. The more things to choose from, the better he'd liked it. She realized the freedom of not having to plan their lives around meals gave flexibility she hadn't had before. It was almost as if her widowed state had some advantages. She felt guilty, even as she thought it.

She turned off the corn chowder and called Betty to share the thought with her. Betty laughed. "Well, you're getting yourself to a different level, another stage in the process," she said.

Alice took advantage of her newfound freedom. Instead of having dinner promptly at 6:30 as she and George always had, she sometimes waited until later, so she could watch the evening news first, or she could finish a chapter of a book, or she could work outside in her garden longer. She could stay up as late as she wanted or go to bed early if it suited her. She hadn't done that when George was alive, but had adapted to his routine, as if it were her own.

She and George had had their habits, their cocktail hour, dinner, television shows they watched. Now she could watch whatever she wanted, when she wanted. If she woke in the middle of the night, she could turn on the light and read, or watch an old movie, and sleep in if she needed to. It was fun for awhile, as she did things at odd times of the night or day.

But as the summer ended, and the days got colder, she grew depressed again. She had always had a hard time with the end of summer, the back-to-school advertisements reminded her that winter was just around the corner. This year it would be worse, as she contemplated long days and longer nights alone in the house, without her gardening to distract her, and the gray days and the howling winds that blew in off Lake Erie in November. How would she get through the winter?

She needed a purpose. Now that there was no one to take care of, she felt adrift, as if she might just muddle through life until the end of her days. She thought about it, what she might do, how she could fill the days that stretched endlessly to March or April when she could get back outside. She worried that the sadness would return and she would spend afternoons sleeping away her misery, and would become someone no one wanted to have around.

She thought about George, about their life. How she had loved him and how complete she had felt being his wife. She was able to think those thoughts without weeping the day away, at least. Well, mostly.

His illness had been so sudden and it seemed as if it were happening not just to him, but to both of them. Those were terrible days when they didn't know which way to turn. How ineffective she had been. She wondered if she'd been any comfort to him at all, during his last days, since she could barely concentrate on anything but the horror of it all.

She thought about life, and the sudden loss of it, and what dying really meant. She remembered the hospice people who had come in and brought at least some order to their lives with their efficient ways. How they had helped George and made him comfortable, and taken over for her, told her what she needed to do. If it hadn't been for those nurses and technicians, she didn't know how she could have gotten through it. She would have had to put George in the hospital, and surely he wouldn't have wanted that. The way he felt about doctors, as if he were almost afraid of them, his last days would have been terrifying if he hadn't been able to be at home. She felt this to be true, even though he'd never said it.

Alice went to church regularly, as she had been taught to do, but as she sat in the beautiful church, half-empty now, she reflected on her life and eventual death. What it meant to be a Christian, to be religious, to believe in life after death. She wondered if George had ever had these thoughts. Or was she having them only because he had been taken away so suddenly and she was forced to confront the reality of it? Maybe those thoughts could only happen after she'd been through the pain, that a life could be taken at any moment.

She thought about death, really thought about it, and it was something she hadn't thought of in any real way before. Those thoughts had been kept on some plane, on a level that was out there somewhere that she'd never quite grasped. She had lost her grandparents, her parents, George's parents, as they grew old and died of age-related illnesses, but it never quite settled in, what it meant. She attributed it to her youthful view, that old people die, but didn't associate death with herself, or George.

As the weeks wore on, and it became bitterly cold, and the wind tore into her when she went outside, she continued to go to church, and think thoughts she was now becoming comfortable with. Everyone would die, herself, her sons, her grandchildren. She had come to accept it and contemplate it without fear. She thought about it at night, when she had a glass of wine in her hand, and was cozy in her house, with an afghan around her.

She considered volunteer work. At first she thought she might visit people in nursing homes, especially those who had no one. Then one Sunday, the Priest serving Mass announced that one of the parishioners was under hospice care and that the hospice needed volunteers.

After Mass, as she shook hands with Father Mike, she asked if she might speak to him about something. He said if she would be able to wait for twenty minutes, he would be able to see her, after the last of the congregation had left.

She told him what she'd thought about, that she'd contemplated some type of volunteer work, and when she'd heard him mention that the hospice needed volunteers, she wanted to learn more about it, what was involved with becoming a hospice volunteer.

"Do you know, are you aware, what you'd be getting into, Alice?" Father Mike asked. "It's not always easy. You'd have to separate your emotions from any situation, for the good of the patient."

"I understand that," Alice said.

"There's training involved too, and sometimes there's no funding for it. You might have to do it on your own. I wish it could be different. It's a commitment."

"I realize that. I don't have a problem with commitment," Alice said.

"No, I wouldn't think so. Well then, take this literature, and read through it, and if you still think it's for you, contact the Hospice Agency directly. And God bless you, Alice. You can make a difference."

"Thank you, Father."

She read the literature and beyond that, visited the local library, and the big library downtown, to get every book on the subject she could find. She pored over the pamphlets and books, reading and re-reading the testimonials and stories of real patients and it all made sense to her. The purpose was to give the caregiver time off, if the patient was at home, or to be with the patient so he or she is not alone, if in a facility. To be supportive, and understanding. To be there.

After the research was done, she decided to call the agency and get started. The woman who answered the phone told Alice what the next steps would be. There would be several meetings which would provide instructions on what to expect, the different stages of a terminal illness and possible challenges she might encounter. After the series of meetings, she would be assigned to one or more patients.

Alice signed up to attend the first meeting. The instructor was a soft-spoken man in his early to mid-forties. He stressed that hospice volunteers must separate their feelings from the job they are to perform. They must not get too attached, and most of all must not cry in front of the patient or show emotion, as that can be very upsetting. She knew that could potentially be an issue, since she cried at the drop of a hat.

"Once people become comfortable with the dying process, they look at death in a whole different light, that it is just another event in the process of living," he said. Alice felt she had come to that same conclusion.

After she'd attended the meetings and completed the training, and was still determined, she felt it safe to tell her family and friends that she was going to do it. It would have been uncomfortable for her if she'd announced it, and backed out later. She would have considered that a failure.

She would tell the family at Christmas, when they were all together. With the New Year, she would begin living again, a new life, a life that would be more than just concentrating on her

own sadness. Maybe it would bring her peace of mind but, more important, maybe there would be a few people who might be a little happier in their last days, because of her.