

White Place

The first patient Alice came to know as part of her hospice volunteer program was Ruth Hofstrayer, diagnosed with colon cancer three years earlier. Ruth had not had any of the screenings for her cancer because she never could manage to talk openly about certain bodily functions. As a result, the cancer had taken hold and spread, before Ruth would admit to herself, or anyone else, that anything was amiss. Once she had suspected something for some time, she finally confided to her daughter about it, who immediately arranged a visit to the family doctor.

Ruth had taken chemo treatments for three years, and managed to stave the cancer off for all that time. But finally the side effects of the treatments outweighed any benefits and she became too weak to continue them. She now lived at her daughter, Adrienne's house, in the guest bedroom.

Adrienne had fixed up the room, bringing some of her mother's favorite things, family pictures and her favorite rocking chair, which on a good day, she could still sit in. It was an old fashioned chair, with dark, ornately carved wood and the arms of the chair, the round seat and oval back were covered with needlepoint, which Ruth had made herself, decades ago, and it looked as good today as it did the day she'd finished it. The background was dark green, as was popular in those days, with brightly colored flowers, pink and red, bright white and yellow.

Ruth loved her chair and her daughter for thinking of it. She knew her daughter was glad to have her there, but Adrienne was so emotional most of the time that many days, she could hardly talk to her mother at all. Adrienne tried to keep up a cheerful banter but whenever the talk turned serious, she'd remember something she had to do, something else demanding her attention and left the room.

But Ruth suspected Adrienne's husband, William, might not be particularly happy about the situation. While he'd consented to it, Ruth thought him demanding, that he didn't want his life interrupted, no matter what. She was sure of it.

Adrienne had arranged for a volunteer from hospice to come each weekday afternoon. The hospice nurse came in the morning and tended to Ruth and Adrienne needed to be in the house at that time, to help, or to receive instructions. But when the hospice volunteer came, this would be her time to get out of the house to run errands, or relax and escape the pressures of the sickroom for an hour or two.

Alice worried. Her first patient. Would she say the right things? But if Alice didn't know what to expect, it was clear Ruth didn't either. They spent the first afternoon getting to know one another and hardly talked at all about Ruth's illness. Alice was surprised that Ruth wanted to know all about her, as if they were going to be good friends. They exchanged stories, told each other about children and grandchildren and dead husbands. The afternoon flew by.

Ruth had to be helped into and out of her chair and, once settled, Alice went to the kitchen and brought back steaming cups of tea for both of them. She helped Ruth to the bathroom and fluffed up her pillow, straightened the bedclothes, and made her comfortable for an afternoon nap. She sat quietly while Ruth slept and when she woke, Alice poured fresh water and placed it by the bed, and turned on the TV so Ruth could watch the news after Alice left.

"I don't like to drive in the dark," Alice said. "I'll need to run along, but as the days get longer, I can stay a bit later."

Alice worried that might have been the wrong thing to say. Was she denying the fact that Ruth was dying by assuming she would be coming still, during the months of spring and

summer? Well, she was bound to make a few mistakes along the way. One error could be overlooked.

Alice visited Ruth each weekday and on most Sunday afternoons. Adrienne's husband was there on weekends, so Alice stayed out of the kitchen those days and instead brought flavored teas from home in thermos bottles and they tried different flavors, deciding which they liked best.

Two weeks after Alice's first visit, she suggested they might read a book together.

"We could decide which book to read, like a book club," Alice said. "I can read out loud and we can discuss it as we go. What do you think?"

"That sounds wonderful!" Ruth said. "Let's read a classic. There are so many books I always meant to read but never found the time."

"What if we start with something a little lighter and see how we like it. And if that works out, we could try something with a little more bulk. I've always wanted to read Jane Austen but never have," Alice said.

"That does sound good," Ruth said. "Pride and Prejudice? Though I'm not sure how light that will be."

"I'll go to out tomorrow and borrow or buy the book. If I can't find 'Pride and Prejudice', I'll get something else by Austen. Maybe Sense and Sensibility."

Alice finished the first chapter of Pride and Prejudice.

"Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve and caprice, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develope. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news."

"It's pretty clear Mr. Bennet favors one of his daughters over the other," Alice said.

"It seems it was quite all right in those days to favor one daughter over another and make no bones about it," Ruth said.

"It would seem so," Alice giggled. They had unwittingly taken on the nuances of the language as put forth by Jane Austen.

"It seems like Jane Austen says quite a bit in just a few sentences. I like how she summed up Mrs. Bennet in that last paragraph. You know exactly what kind of a woman she is," Ruth said.

"What a character!" Alice said. "Her husband seems to be deliberately mocking her, yet she doesn't seem to understand that."

"And Mr. Bingley doesn't know what is about to hit him."

Alice read the second chapter. The chapters were short, little snippets, just enough to read, digest and discuss easily without forgetting too many of the details.

Mr. Bennet had played a little joke on his wife, by visiting Mr. Bingley and not telling her that he had. Apparently, it was only proper for gentlemen to call on each other first, before either man could introduce the other to any ladies in his family. The ladies, Mrs. Bennet and her five daughters were all a-twitter as they learned about Mr. Bennet's visit to Mr. Bingley and they fantasized about the upcoming ball to be held in a fortnight, and contemplated introductions and wondered with whom Mr. Bingley would choose to dance.

“Isn’t it funny how they call each other ‘Mr.’ And ‘Mrs.’ even though they are married,” Alice said.

“Yes. It would have been very trying and quite a mouthful for my husband and I to call each other ‘Mr. and Mrs. Hofstrayer’. Luckily, the Bennets had in easier.”

Alice read the passage in the third chapter which first described Mr. Darcy. The two women collapsed into giggles as Ms. Austen described Mr. Darcy, first as being thought by the other men to be a “fine figure of a man” and the ladies interested in his ten thousand a year and his handsomeness, until they discovered that he was “proud”.

“His manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity.” Alice reread the sentence. “In other words, Mr. Darcy was fine with everyone until he opened his mouth,” she said.

“Yes, seems he turned out to be a bit of a jerk,” Ruth said.

“Well, you know how it ends.”

“Yes, but I’m pretending that I don’t.”

They finished up the third chapter and decided to stop for tea. They discussed the book, and how much they enjoyed it.

“I think this is a very good idea we’ve had,” Alice said.

Some days Ruth sat in her chair for a while. Those days seemed to be coming further and further apart, but Alice didn’t mention the unhappy fact. Mostly Alice sat in the green rocking chair and read *Pride and Prejudice* while Ruth listened with her eyes closed. Sometimes Alice paused after a paragraph and Ruth sometimes raised her finger to signal that she would like to discuss what they had just read. Alice, not wanting to tire Ruth, took her signals when to talk and when to just read.

One afternoon, after Alice had visited Ruth for six weeks and they had digested half of *Pride and Prejudice*, Alice closed the book. Ruth looked tired.

“Ruth, do you want to rest now?”

“Yes, please.”

Alice settled her comfortably and darkened the room. She sat in the green rocker and closed her eyes, felt her own sleepiness. Ruth breathed evenly, sleeping for perhaps twenty minutes before waking suddenly. She seemed disoriented.

“Alice, I had a dream. I dreamed what it would be like to die,” Ruth said.

“Tell me about the dream.”

“I was on a white horse, and it was walking, then it broke into a trot. Then it was galloping and I was very afraid because everything was rushing past me so fast and I thought I would fall off. Then it seemed as if the horse was going so fast that I could no longer make out any images, it was all a blur. And suddenly, I was no longer afraid. It was as if I could see myself while on that horse. I was young, and I had a white gown on and my hair was long. It didn’t look like me, as I look now, but I knew it was me, as I used to look. Everything was white at the end, the horse, the dress, and the white place that the horse was galloping towards. And then I woke up.”

“What do you think that meant, do you think?” Alice asked.

“Death. I can’t think what else it could have meant.”

“Do you think the dream symbolized *your* death?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I would like to, but I think I would like to think about it a bit first.”

“Of course, whenever you are ready.” Alice patted Ruth’s hand and hung onto her limp fingers. They sat quietly for a few moments.

“Ruth, I am going to have to go home now. I am due at my son’s house tonight for dinner. It’s his birthday and the whole family is coming over. I will tell you all about it tomorrow, and I’ll bring a little cake for you. Hopefully, you’ll be able to enjoy that.”

“That would be lovely. I’ll look forward to tomorrow then.”

Alice drove home and thought about how she had her family and her life and her functions to go to. It seemed all Ruth had was their friendship. She wasn’t sure what went on between Ruth and her daughter, who seemed so agitated most days, as if she could only see what her mother’s illness was doing to her, rather than how it affected her mother.

Ruth was in Alice’s thoughts much of the time she wasn’t with her. She read her hospice volunteer books faithfully, how to relate, how to act, but sometimes she thought it might be okay just to be herself and act naturally, the way she’d done with Ruth.

Alice did not bring up the subject of the dream again. She’d wait for Ruth to do that, she decided. Instead, she told Ruth that the anniversary of her husband’s death was coming up, one week away.

“I don’t know whether the anniversary will affect me or not,” Alice said.

“I can’t think that a date on the calendar would make such a difference,” Ruth said. “I don’t remember feeling like that when Tom died.”

“That’s probably true. I am a bit of a stickler about dates. I remember everyone’s birthday, I remember the date that George asked me to marry him, I remember the date the night I told him I was pregnant with Geo. Silly really. Dates don’t matter, do they, Ruth?”

“I don’t think they really do. I hope you don’t feel sad on that day, but if you do, you come on over here and we’ll have a good cry together,” Ruth said.

Alice smiled. “Well, I don’t know about that. I feel like I’ve cried all the tears I could possibly summon up, this past year. All I know is, that he is gone now and life has to go on and I must do with it what I can.”

“Actually,” Ruth was whispering, as if she were afraid someone would overhear, “I was never that happily married. My husband and I did not have much of a relationship. We stayed married for the whole time, but I was never happy and I don’t think he was either. Is that terrible to say? When he died, it wasn’t much of a change for me. I thought that was the way all marriages were. It was only a few years before he died that I came to know that it could have been much different.”

“What happened that made you realize that?” Alice asked.

“Well, I had a friend, Josie. She was my oldest and dearest friend. We grew up together and we tried to stay in touch, but it became harder and harder as the years went on, what with the families and her moving to New Jersey and all. I was in her wedding and she was in mine. When her husband, Victor, died, and she called me to tell me, I told her I would come visit her. But I said I would visit her after the funeral, when everyone had left to go home. I thought that might give her something to look forward to, because she sounded so sad on the phone. So I went and I stayed for a week. This was twenty years ago, and we had the best time. We talked about old times, about all the people we had known, and she talked about her marriage to Victor. It was then I realized that people were getting a whole lot more out of marriage than I was. I just let her

talk on and on and I got more and more enlightened. I returned home, after a week and told my husband about the visit and what Josie had said about Victor. He wouldn't even listen to me. So I gave up. It would have probably been too late for us anyway, to have anything different." She looked down at her hands, folded on the coverlet.

"Anyway," she continued, "when he died, it just wasn't that big of a deal. Isn't that awful?"

"No, of course not," Alice said, though she was sure she needed to mull it over in her own mind before offering any wisdom. "Of course not."

Adrienne stopped in to say she was going out, to the grocery store and a few other stops along the way. "Is there anything special you'd like, Mum?"

"Oh, I can't think of anything, dear, but thanks for asking." Ruth was always so polite, so formal with her daughter, as if she knew that her illness was making things very difficult for Adrienne and Ruth wanted to be as little trouble as possible.

"Well then, I'll be off. I'll be back before you leave, Alice."

"Stay as long as you like, dear," Alice said. She hadn't meant to call Adrienne "dear". She thought Adrienne looked tired and more than a little unhappy and wondered if having her mother in her home during her last days was going to be too much of a strain. She didn't look like a woman who was very strong. Alice had observed a little bullying of Adrienne by her husband.

"Poor Adrienne," Ruth said of her daughter after they heard the car pull out of the driveway. "I don't think she is too happy about the situation, right now. I suppose I should offer to be put into some sort of facility in order to spare her."

"I think maybe Adrienne feels better having you here," Alice said.

"She is quite timid. I think William intimidates her. She never stands up to him and he is often short with her. He just doesn't seem very nice to her at all. I don't like him," Ruth admitted. "I never have. He got her pregnant, you know, and I think she might feel grateful that he married her. She needs someone to snap her out of it. She's a good-looking woman, and quite capable, yet she has no feeling of self-worth. At least Mr. Hofstrayer was more gentle-natured, even though he was unwilling to talk or be close to a woman." Ruth smiled at the reference to her husband in the formal sense, as Jane Austen would have done.

"Poor Adrienne," Alice said. "It's a sad situation."

"Yes, and she is not dealing well with my illness, and impending death," Ruth said. "If I say anything at all about it, she shushes me up. I had said I wanted a few pieces of jewelry to go to her, and some to my granddaughter and you know what she said? She said, 'Oh Mum, you will be wearing those pieces again and for a long time too. You just rest and concentrate on getting well.' I wanted to tell her that I wasn't going to get well but she can't handle it and won't listen. It would be more helpful to me if she could talk about it. I'd like to make sure of a few things. I'd like to even plan my own funeral maybe. I'd like to talk about all those things openly but she won't."

"Yes, I have seen that in Adrienne and I'm not surprised to hear it," Alice said. "I don't think we can force people to talk about such things if they aren't ready. This may be her first experience and she isn't quite sure how to behave. Once you accept that dying is another life process, and you stop being afraid of it, it becomes more natural to talk about it. I wouldn't have said that a year ago, but after what happened to George, I did and do think about it. And the more I do, the more comfortable I become with it. I hope you are feeling the same way, and that I haven't said too much."

“Oh, no.” Ruth breathed, as if sighing. “I am so relieved to hear you say it. And I need to talk about it with someone. It’s the only thing that makes any sense to me right now. I know that I haven’t long, maybe a few weeks, maybe a few months, if I’m lucky.” She was quiet for a moment, contemplated what to say next. “I haven’t been a religious person, really. I guess I was always a bit of a ‘methodist’, doing what I felt I was supposed to, what I needed to do in order to be a good person. Like going to church was a chore, something you did and were glad when it was over. But when faced with cancer, you think things over a little more carefully.”

“Yes,” Alice said. “I was the same way. When people around me died, it was as if I was afraid to contemplate it, so I didn’t think about it much. Just chalked it up to old age and I felt okay with that. But suddenly, it’s you, or your generation that is dying. Then you have to confront the issue face on.”

“What do you think happens when you die?” Ruth asked.

“I do believe in an afterlife of some sort, though I don’t pretend to understand what that could possibly be. They certainly tell you that often enough in church. So I guess I’ll trust those instincts. It may be that it is safer for me to believe than the alternative.”

“I think it might be just kind of nothingness,” Ruth said. “And I can’t bring myself to contemplate that. I just can’t. So I tell myself that billions and billions of people have died before me, it isn’t as if it’s anything new. It hasn’t...” she laughed. “I almost said ‘it hasn’t killed anyone yet’.” Alice laughed too, but her eyes were a little teary and she hoped Ruth didn’t notice.

Alice knew the difficult part would be upon her soon. She couldn’t cry in front of Ruth, even though they talked about such serious subjects. She must maintain her composure if she was going to be able to help people. Soon she would see Ruth decline each time, and how death seemed to come a little closer each day.

Alice passed the anniversary of her husband’s death without mentioning it to Ruth at all. Ruth seemed to be having a good day, she asked Alice to help her sit up in bed. She had slept well, she had no pain, and had enjoyed her lunch.

“Adrienne is such a good cook,” she said. “She makes the most delicious, healthy meals. Today she served me a cup of homemade tomato bisque soup, with some of her homegrown basil. And half of a chicken salad sandwich, with water chestnuts, celery, a hint of minced onion and mayonnaise. It was wonderful. I ate everything and a cup of tea too. It makes Adrienne happy when I finish what she brings me.”

Once Ruth was settled in, Alice opened *Pride and Prejudice* to the place they had left off, and read. Ruth turned her head as Alice finished the chapter. Mr. Collins, who was related to Mr. Bennet and the rightful ‘male heir’ could, if he wished, turn out Mrs. Bennet and her daughters, upon the demise of Mr. Bennet. He had asked for the eldest daughter, Jane’s hand in marriage. Mrs. Bennet had informed Mr. Collins that Jane was ‘likely to be very soon engaged’ to Mr. Bingley, although that was certainly an exaggeration at this early stage. So then Mr. Collins settled on Lizzie, who being more willful than the rest of her sisters, turned Mr. Collins down flat. Later, everyone was astounded by the fact that Miss Charlotte Lucas had accepted a marriage proposal from Mr. Collins. She was twenty-seven, considered to be past marrying age. She offered her explanation to Lizzie.

“I see what you are feeling,” replied Charlotte: ‘you must be surprised, very much surprised, so lately as Mr. Collins was wishing to marry you. But when you have had time to think it all over, I hope you will be satisfied with what I have done. I am not a romantic, you

know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.” Alice read.

Ruth said, “I think I am more like Charlotte. It seems Charlotte knew what she was getting herself into and that was just fine. She didn’t want any more than that.”

“Charlotte was probably not all that happy with Mr. Collins, but her advantage was that she was fine with that. She only wanted to be content.”

“I think Charlotte was fine with Mr. Collins. She said herself, that she was never a romantic. So I think Charlotte did not have the capability to feel much happiness or unhappiness. She was much more pragmatic than that,” Ruth said.

Alice agreed. “That’s quite right, happy was the wrong word to use in this case.”

“Lizzie wanted more. She wanted love, passion, happiness. She would have been miserable with Mr. Collins and was willing to take the chance for something more so she wouldn’t have to marry him,” Ruth said.

“I think today the term is ‘settling’. That’s the term I hear my granddaughter use. That’s Amanda, who accuses her sister of settling for a big house, a rich husband, material things. And it’s true, too. Allison is a Charlotte and Amanda is a Lizzie.”

“Some things don’t change,” Ruth said.

Pride and Prejudice progressed a little more slowly as the weeks wore on. Alice was comforted to find that spring was on its way and she was still visiting with Ruth, just as she had said she would back in January, when she worried it was the wrong thing to say. These days, Ruth slept more often, and when awake, she wanted to talk, rather than read.

They were at the part of the story where Mr. Darcy had made a very awkward proposal to Lizzie, implying that his feelings for her were unfortunate and he wished he didn’t feel so, but he did, even though she was far inferior, in family, to himself, but that he did, in fact, love her. Lizzie flew into a controlled rage and gave her answer which was “No, never!” Such misunderstandings!

The two women, now very used to the style of writing, often mimicked this way of speaking and were amused by it. They continued to read and rehash everything and compare it to life in the 1990’s and how things changed superficially, but at the core of it, remained the same.

Ruth planned her funeral. Alice said when the time came she would be able to tell Adrienne what her mother wanted. As the warm spring days turned to summer, Ruth began to fade away. Her skin became yellowed as her liver, full of cancer, worked with less and less efficiency. Many days, Ruth slept much of the time and she was rarely able to have a conversation. They now read very little, sometimes only a page or two. But Ruth lived long enough to see Lizzie and Mr. Darcy united, as they confessed their love for one another.

Alice read the last page and closed the book. They’d had plans to read another but it was not to be. She was sure of it. On her way out, she felt she must take a chance, even though she didn’t know whether or not it was the right thing to do. She stopped in the kitchen, where Adrienne was washing up some dishes she had used to prepare dinner.

“Adrienne,” she said. “I think it is time for you to say goodbye to your mother, dear. I am so sorry but she appears to be slipping in and out of consciousness. It would be very beneficial for her, and for you, to say it.” Adrienne said nothing, but stood with drying towel in midair, and nodded.

The following day, Adrienne met Alice at the door.

“I did,” she said. “I said goodbye. I held her hand and said it and she smiled at me a little. I haven’t gotten her to speak so far yet today but I sense that she is waiting for you. To tell you goodbye and to thank you for being such a good friend to her. I thank you too.” Alice, nodded, not sure she would be able to speak.

Ruth was still when Alice came into the room, but when Alice said “Hello, Ruth” she opened her eyes.

“Well, Alice, I think this is it. Thanks for being such a good friend in my last days. The one thing I hate about dying is that I won’t get to talk you any longer, dear friend. Keep reading.”

“I will, Ruth, I will. And I’ll think of you while I’m reading Jane Austen. Because I will you know, I’ll go on reading and I’ll think about our time together and how much it has meant to me.” Ruth closed her eyes then and Alice sat with her friend through the remainder of the afternoon.

The next morning, Adrienne called to say that Alice needn’t come that afternoon because her mother had passed away peacefully in her sleep.

Alice attended the funeral service for Ruth. While the minister prayed for Ruth’s soul, Alice pressed a rosary to her lips and imagined Ruth had returned to her White Place.