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## Alice in Dairyland

When the phone rang, I was still in bed under the covers trying to stay warm though it was nearly noon. As I ran to answer, I saw it was snowing again. It was January, 1989. I'd been in Wisconsin, America's frozen dairy land, nearly six years so I should have been used to it, but I was still a Florida girl at heart and each flake seemed to take me by surprise. "Alice Anne?" a voice said. My name came out slurred, like it was *Allison*.

"Mom?" I said. My mother had flown up from Jacksonville to spend Christmas with me only to collapse in the airport, a dozen tiny bottles of Bourbon rolling from her purse. Since then she had been in a special university clinic for her various addictions—alcohol, valium. Until now, though she was only a couple of miles away, just across the lake at the far end of the campus, she had not been allowed to call or have visitors.

"Can you talk? Is Anders there?" my mother asked. Anders was my boyfriend. I was talking on his phone. I was in his apartment. I had a room in a graduate student scholarship house but, even to my mother, I did not pretend to spend much time there. My mother was suspicious of Anders because

once, in an uncharacteristic fit of honesty and confession, I'd told her Anders disapproved of her drinking.

"Anders!" I called. There was no answer, but even so I lowered my voice as I said, "Listen, Mom, couldn't I take you home? Check you in someplace there? It's going to be *below* zero here tonight. Couldn't . . ." Somehow, as irrational as this was, I believed it was her coming north, leaving Jacksonville, and not the alcohol or pills that had caused her collapse. She had fled winter and her native Munich when she'd married my father and had a horror both of cold and anything German. If only I could get her someplace warm, someplace far less German than Wisconsin, she would not be sick.

"I have to go, Alice," was all my mother said. "I just wanted to tell you I sent you a belated Christmas card. I made it in art therapy class. I sent one to your brother, too."

"But Mom," I started. I hadn't yet told my brother Mark our mother was in the hospital. As a matter of fact, I had outright lied, sending a Christmas present of Florida oranges to his apartment in San Francisco, telling the operator at the grove's 800-number to sign the card "From Mom." I heard a voice in the background call my mother's name. *Mrs. Stratton* . . .

"I'm fine, Alice, really." Her voice was shaking. "They say I can have visitors soon." She hung up.

After talking to my mother I had a terrible craving for Scotch, or Bourbon, or even a tall glass of gin. None of which I had had since I last visited her in Jacksonville. I'd grown up in a house stocked with tax-exempt Army liquor, and my mother still kept a mean bar. Look where it got her, I imagined Anders saying.

Oh, Lord, I would have to call Mark tonight, tell him all about Mom before he got her card with its locked-ward address. I stared into Anders's refrigerator for a while, but it held only some bottles of murky looking natural fruit juices. If he were home he would remind me that my mother's collapse was thirty years of hard drinking in the making, remind me

that I was the child here—though a child of twenty-six on her way to a PhD in English—and therefore not responsible for how my mother had lived her life. But what did Anders know? It was my brother Mark and I who were there after our dad left. Mom pulling us through the streets of Madrid where we'd gone on some ill-conceived "space available" Army vacation. In the rain, lost and crying, she had kept telling us over and over to go to the American Consulate if she dropped dead. Anders had sane Lutheran parents. They didn't drink or have passports.

I settled on some yogurt, added a handful of Grape-Nuts. Ate it standing by the sliding-glass door that looked out over the lake. This was Lake Mendota. There were two large lakes on either side of downtown Madison—Mendota and Monona. Their names sounded so much alike, it had taken me six years to stop mixing them up.

Even though Lake Mendota was several miles across, it froze hard enough to park cars on. When I first moved to Madison from Florida and my new college friend Bibi told me about the cars, I thought she was kidding. How did the fish breathe under the ice? Then I got used to the solid concrete white of the frozen lakes in winter. But this winter I kept hoping for a mild spell, for a patch of blue to hold out in the center. Something my mother could see from her hospital room—presuming she had a window. But over the last month, since her complete and astonishing airport collapse, I had watched the ice creep in from the edges until now, way out in the middle of Lake Mendota, people were skating. I put my feet up on the radiator, trying to get my toes warm, and started working.

I was revising the syllabus for the freshman English class I taught each semester as part of my graduate assistantship. Each semester I took out all the assignments that hadn't quite worked as well as I had hoped. Usually that was all of them. Then, slowly, I put back the ones I still had hopes for, filled in the blank weeks with assignments I either made up or bor-

rowed from happier, more successful teaching assistants. My feet were almost warm when the phone rang again.

“Alice, this is Anders.”

“Hi,” I said. “Are you in the darkroom?” Anders was a new assistant professor in the art department, teaching nearly all of the photography courses. He’d been up late the night before, taking pictures of me pretending to be asleep in our ruffled, unmade bed. Something about black-and-white film, Anders had explained, turned wrinkles into light, and shadow into art.

“Listen,” he said, “I’m at Angela Mosley’s apartment on Commercial Avenue, out past the Oscar Meyer plant. Do you remember where it is?” Just before my mother arrived, Anders had taken me to an end-of-the-term party that Angela, one of his graduate students, had given.

“I think so.” I remembered the place as a wall of identical doors facing a parking lot, more like a motel than an apartment building.

“There’s a wreath with some Christmas lights on the door.” Anders sounded winded, as if he’d sprinted up several flights of stairs.

I felt a little slow.

“Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“Angela is,” he said. “I’ll tell you about it later. I came here to help her get some things. Now her car won’t start and she needs to get out of here. My car keys are in the fruit bowl by the door. Can you bring them to me?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m on my way.” He hung up. Even though I had a valid Wisconsin driver’s license, I’d learned to drive in Florida and had never, in all my impoverished student years in Wisconsin, owned a car, so I was not an old hand at icy winter roads. The snow was blowing like sand across the road, and I drove very carefully. After maybe twenty minutes of this I found Commercial Avenue, then the apartment building. I spotted the lights on the wreath from the parking lot. When

Mark and I were kids in Jacksonville, my mother had made us string Christmas lights in our cabbage palms.

I waited for a minute in the parking lot, then climbed the stairs, which were outside and open to the wind, as if this were Florida not Wisconsin. Someone had scattered the steps liberally with rock salt to keep them from icing over. I rubbed my hands together, wishing I'd remembered my gloves. Even after six winters in Wisconsin I had trouble remembering the cold weather extras like hats and gloves, had trouble believing in weather cold enough to hurt. No wonder thirty thousand people a month moved to Florida, I thought. Even my thick wool coat felt thin. I knocked on the door. *Hurry up, Anders, hurry up.* But no one answered. I knocked again, then stepped back and looked at the wreath, which I now could see was plastic. A little hand-lettered card below it read

Angela Mosley and Jo Beth Kasenbaum

WELCOME FRIENDS

I knocked one last time, then gave up. Maybe Anders thought the snow had been too much for me, had called a cab.

I went back down the stairs to the parking lot, but just as I reached Anders's old Volvo a pickup truck bumped into the parking lot without slowing down, and blocked me in. A woman jumped out; it was Angela's roommate, Jo Beth. I remembered her vaguely from the party. She had come in late, sat alone in the kitchen drinking a beer. She was a big woman with short, shiny black hair. She had on a hat and gloves, a nice thick down jacket. Jo Beth saw me, pointed a gloved finger. "It was you. All the time it was you. Where is she?" When Angela had gone into the kitchen to get a corkscrew, I remembered, I had seen her kiss Jo Beth lightly on the lips.

"Angela?" I said. "I don't know. I knocked . . ." I started. Jo Beth shoved me up against the car.

"You fucking bitch!" Her breath hung in the air. She pressed

a finger into my chest. I looked down and realized that what I'd thought was her finger was the barrel of a gun. She had a gun. Not a big gun, but a gun. I couldn't believe it.

"She was happy," Jo Beth was saying. "I know she was." She had the gun pressed to the middle button of my jacket. She pulled at something on a chain around her neck with her free, non-gun-holding hand. A large gold cross.

"Please," I say, "I don't know anything about this."

Jo Beth quit playing with her cross. She took a step back, the gun shaking in her hand, and I realized that—cross or no cross—she was going to shoot me. It was broad daylight in Madison, Wisconsin—a town with almost no violent crime—and I was about to get shot. No matter that her hand was shaking, the gun first pointing at my heart, now only at my stomach. It was so cold, if the bullet hit me I would fall down and lie there until I froze to death.

"She was happy. *We* were happy." I was about to be shot for stealing someone's lesbian lover. I was innocent, but maybe, just maybe my solid, reliable Wisconsin boyfriend wasn't. Would I die without knowing? Anders, you shit. If I were to get shot it would be in the papers. My mother would read about it in the *Wisconsin State Journal*. No.

I dropped to my knees. Jo Beth was startled. I closed my eyes. "Our Father, Who art in Heaven. Hallowed be Thy Name. Give us this day our daily bread." I heard Jo Beth's knees hit the icy asphalt beside me and then a noise, a gentle sucking like the drain on the side of a pool. She was crying. "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those . . ."

"Who have trespassed against us." Jo put her arms around me, her bulky jacket making her hug thick and clumsy. She still had the gun. I couldn't seem to remember the rest of the Lord's Prayer. Where had I learned it anyway? My family had bounced from one lukewarm Protestant church to another, never staying long enough to learn even the words to

the hymns. “Jesus Christ,” I said, “Lamb of God, whose blood washes away our sins.” Jo Beth didn’t seem to know that one. Maybe I was making it up. I started over. “Our Father Who art,” and she said it with me, finished it when I stopped. *For ever and ever. Amen.*

“Oh, Jesus,” she said, wiping her nose with her sleeve. She slipped the gun into her pocket. She had lost her lover. My mother was in the hospital, begging every day for a drink. “What the fuck,” she said. I nodded, seeing clearly in that moment what she meant.

We got up. My legs were numb from the cold. I almost fell. Jo Beth steadied me, then stepped back, shaking her head. She was still shaking her head when she got in the truck, backed out of the parking lot. I waited, leaning against Anders’s Volvo until Jo Beth’s truck was out of sight, until the sound of the engine faded and then was gone.

I drove back to Anders’s apartment. No one was there. No sign anyone had been there while I was out. I felt weak, as if I had been shot or had somehow mysteriously lost a lot of blood. How did the cops and detectives on TV do it? They got beaten and shot at every week but slowed down only for the commercials. Another fine example of the difference between life and fiction. I drew a hot bath and was about to get in when the phone rang. It was Anders. I walked with the hall extension back into the bathroom.

“Angela remembered she had a roll of quarters, so we took the bus,” he said. “She was afraid Jo Beth would come home early from her shift at Oscar Meyer. They’re breaking up. Angela broke down after class, she was so upset about it. What could I do? I’m her thesis advisor. I had to help out.”

I could hear his Wisconsin honesty. Of course he had to help her. Of course she was nothing but his student. But part of me still thought he might be lying. My father lied to my mother right up to the day he left. “Where are you?” I asked.

“At my office.”

I stuck my left foot in the tub. The hot water burned like hell. “Jo Beth has a gun,” I said.

“Gun?” He pronounced the *n* very carefully, as if he thought maybe what I had said was *gum*. *Watch out, Jo Beth has gum.*

“Gun.” I lifted my left foot out, put it back in. This time the water felt less hot.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I put my right foot in the tub too, stood there. It was weird how the water felt boiling hot to my right foot but only lukewarm to the left. “I mean, I’m not shot.”

“Jesus, Al, I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have called you if I’d had any idea. I never imagined . . .” I shut my eyes and imagined Anders frowning into the phone, brow wrinkled. Of course he hadn’t known Jo Beth would have a gun. Of course he was shocked. His parents would have been shocked. Such things did not exist in their ordered Lutheran universe. “Listen, I’m going to call campus counseling about Jo Beth. I don’t want to get her in trouble, but this is serious. They’ll know what to do. In the meantime I’m sending Angela to the apartment for safe keeping. Will you let her in?”

“Give her your keys,” I said, angry that Anders was so calm. If he really cared he could at least act upset. Calm was acting like my father, calm was being a lying, logical heel. “I’m taking a bath.”

I fell asleep in the tub, woke to find Angela standing in the door. She had flipped on the light and the bathroom fan. Now the water really was lukewarm. She was looking at me clinically, then she shifted her gaze to the toilet. “I have to pee,” she said. She had an unopened bottle of Stoly in one hand. Somewhere between Anders’s office and here she’d found a liquor store.

“There’s a half bath in the hall,” I said. “You passed it coming in. It looks like a closet.” She thought about it for a minute, then left. I got out, put on jeans, a sweatshirt, my Reeboks. Then I checked to make sure Angela had locked the

front door behind her when she let herself in. I didn't think Jo Beth would have any reason to know where Anders lived or to come to his apartment, but it didn't hurt to be careful. I heard the toilet flush, and Angela came out of the half-bath with the bottle of vodka still in her hand. Her hair was wet, as if she had stuck her head in the sink. She held the bottle out to me. "So," she said, "do you want to get drunk?"

We sat at the table by the window, watching the sun go down over the far end of the lake, over my mother's hospital, and pouring shots from the bottle. By the time we were halfway through the Stoly it was so dark outside it seemed like midnight, though it was only five thirty. Angela lit the candles on Anders's table, something he and I never did. His mother had given them to him.

"So," I said, "how come your lover wanted to kill me?" Angela shrugged.

"Everyone acts or reacts in accordance with their social conditioning," she said.

"You mean, if you work at Oscar Meyer packing lunchmeat you are conditioned to shoot people? That's pretty classist." Angela shook her head.

"I'll put it another way. Either we become who our mothers told us to be," she said, "or who they told us not to be." She pulled her fingers through her hair, which was almost dry. In the candlelight it looked blonde and fuller than I remembered it being, and I realized she must have washed it in the sink in the guest bath. With what? I was about to ask, but she said, "I got shot once, you know. Two years ago, in San Francisco." I told her I didn't know, and she told me how she had been walking to the Museum of Contemporary Art with another woman when suddenly her friend said, 'Ouch, I think something stung me.' And there was a little piece of cement stuck in her friend's bare calf, a chip from the sidewalk. 'How . . . ?' her friend started to say.

"Then," Angela said, "I felt somebody slap me hard on the

back, but there wasn't anyone there, and blood started coming through my t-shirt. My friend screamed and I realized I had been shot. I mean, there wasn't a sound or anything, but I looked at the buildings across the street and realized that there must be a sniper up there somewhere. 'Keep walking,' I said to my friend, because I was afraid if the sniper knew I'd been hit, he'd want to finish me off. My friend kept trying to open random doors we passed but it was Sunday, so everything was closed, locked up. A window up ahead of us went *pop* and shattered into this spiderweb, then one behind us, *pop*. No sound but the glass, you know? I was *so* scared. Then, finally, we got to the corner, I saw a bus coming and my friend said, 'Can you run?' and I said, 'Yes.' So we ran and jumped on the bus, and it turned the corner. And that was that." Angela poured the last shot of the vodka into her glass. "They never caught him." She looked at me, pushed her hair out of her face.

"Or her," I said. She didn't smile.

"You don't believe me, do you?" she said, and before I could decide whether I did or not, she lifted her shirt. She was wearing a white cotton sports bra, but above it I saw a small purple scar about the size of a quarter. "That's where the bullet came out." When she moved I smelled sandlewood and realized that she had washed her hair with one of the little round guest soaps I had brought Anders that sat in a wicker basket on the back of the toilet. Who would do such a thing?

"And here's where it went in." She turned her back toward the light, and just below her wing bone I saw a small pink pucker peppered with a few grains of gray. Gun powder? I leaned closer trying to tell, but the candles flickered. "I can't see," I started to say, but suddenly it was not too dark to see but rather too bright. Anders was standing in the doorway, his hand on the light switch. Angela sat up, her spine smacking me in the nose.

“The city police picked up Jo Beth for running a red light. They found the gun,” Anders said. I looked up at Anders. He had his arms crossed over his chest. Angela stood up fast, too fast, and had to grab the table to steady herself. “Go put some water on your face,” Anders said to Angela, and Angela tacked across the room to the bathroom, making it to the door on her second try. Anders watched Angela’s progress as if it were the most interesting and important bit of navigation going on in the world, then shifted his disapproving gaze back to me.

He lifted the empty bottle off the table. He shook his head. “Alice,” he said.

“Alice-iss-iss,” I repeated, quite stupidly drunk. He set the bottle down hard.

“Damn it, Alice. Do you want to end up like your . . .” He stopped himself. Angela had come out of the bathroom. She was doing much better, walking pretty straight, much straighter than I could have, which made me suspect she’d had plenty of experience.

“I think I’ll go to bed,” I said. Anders opened his mouth as if he was going to say something but he didn’t, and he didn’t stop me.

I woke up sometime in the night, drunker than when I had gone to sleep. The bed was spinning like water going down a drain. I flung out one arm, feeling for Anders to steady myself. He wasn’t there. His half of the bed was cold and empty. I listened and thought I could hear his snores coming from the spare bedroom next door, where he kept an old futon we’d slept on before I moved in and he’d been motivated to buy a real bed. Just like my parents, I thought, separate beds. Then I saw that my mother was sitting beside me. I was freezing, even under the down comforter Anders had carefully arranged over me before taking to his futon. My mother was wearing her lightest cotton pj’s and I could see how incredibly thin she was, even under her fierce Florida tan. She was drinking her usual, an iced tea-sized glass of bourbon, something

I'm sure her doctors at the clinic had warned her about in no uncertain terms. When I was growing up she'd always had one or two of those while she fixed dinner. She touched my wrist and her fingers were unbelievably hot. She held out her drink to me, offering me a hair of the dog.

"Stop it, Mom," I said, trying to push the drink away without spilling it all over the bed. She pulled back. I struck out, trying to knock the drink out of her hand. Didn't she know it was killing her?

I felt my fist hit home. "Hey, knock it off!" It was Anders. It was daylight and he was tangled in the cover next to me. Had he been there all night? Had I been dreaming about the futon? About my mother? His cheek was red where I had hit him. "Ouch."

"Sorry," I started, but as the adrenaline, the incredible rush of fear, drained off I realized I was going to be sick. Halfway to the bathroom it hit me that I had slept in my clothes, was even still wearing my sneakers.

I made it to the toilet. My stomach heaved and heaved again, but nothing came up. Kneeling on the tile I was so cold my teeth chattered. Anders came to the door. "Are you all right?" He put a warm hand on the back of my neck. I nodded, regretted it immediately. Anders held his ground, holding my shoulders as my stomach again turned inside out. Even my mother had never done that for me.

"Look on the bright side," I managed, when I could breathe again. "They say people who have bad hangovers never become alcoholics."

After a while I felt a little better, my stomach fooled into thinking I had actually managed to throw up whatever was making me sick, though I knew the vodka had long ago made its way, for better or worse, into my body. "I'll make you some tea," Anders said. I rinsed my mouth, washed my face.

I found Anders in the kitchen waiting for water to boil.

“Where’s Angela?” I asked. Maybe she was the one I’d heard snoring on the futon while Anders slept next to me. Anders frowned. The tea kettle began to whistle. He made two cups of mint tea. I blew on mine then took a sip, waiting for his answer.

“She left last night—to bail Jo Beth out. She said Jo Beth’s getting a gun proved she loved her.” Anders shook his head. It was not a Lutheran world. “I guess they’re not breaking up after all.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. And I was. Guns as love seemed sad to me. So sad, that on top of being nauseated, it was almost unbearable. And I still had to call Mark and tell him the truth about where our mother had spent Christmas. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want life to be so goddamn sad.

The phone rang and I heard Anders say, “Yes, this is Anders Dahl. Alice Stratton?” She’s right—*oh, no . . .*”

And I knew what had happened, as clearly as if I’d seen this bit of bad news coming, seen it leave the clinic and cross the lake to Anders’s waiting ear. I knew who I was never going to visit in the hospital, who was not going home to Jacksonville, who I would never see again, ever, or at least in this life. My mother was dead.

Anders was still nodding into the telephone, “Yes, yes, I see . . .” Any second, he would hand me the phone. But I didn’t want it. I backed across the kitchen into the dining room. I pulled hard on the handle of the sliding-glass door, and though I didn’t expect it to, it gave way. This was Wisconsin. It was not even locked. I opened it, and cold air spilled over my feet. Anders felt it too. “Alice!” He dropped the phone, but I was already out the door, down the short slippery lawn, one foot on the ice. “Wait!” he called after me, but I didn’t. He wouldn’t catch me. I had slept in my sneakers and he was barefoot. My Reeboks skidded forward on the ice. I almost fell, but the soles caught on the snow cover and I was not just walking on water—like Jesus—but running. It felt strangely fa-

miliar, like I was, at long last, the real Alice, the one who lived her life in Wonderland, where when you fall down a rabbit hole or step through a mirror, everything changes.

As I ran my eyes began to water. Tears froze on my cheeks. As far I could see there was emptiness. This morning I was the only living soul on the ice. No one was skating or ice fishing or walking their large furry dog. A gust of wind hit me, unbelievably sharp, and brought Anders's voice with it. "Alice, wait," then took it away. In that second I knew what he was thinking—that I was headed along the edge of the lake for the hospital, but he was wrong. I was not headed anywhere you could find people. I meant to keep running until I reached the diamond heart of the lake. I would live there, at least until spring. Live where everything was white, white on white, whiter than white. Where my mother, if not exactly alive, was, at least, not officially dead.

But Anders did catch me. He threw himself at me in a full flying tackle, and we both went skidding across the ice, Anders holding me tight. I opened my mouth, prepared to shout, to be angry, but I wasn't. Anders had run across the lake in unlaced shoes with no socks to save me from myself. We lay panting, face down on the ice, Anders's arms around me. And maybe it was only the running, but for the first time in a long time I was not cold.