
POETRY/FICTION

Immortal

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Once (and only once, quantum physics notwithstanding) there was a person named Alice P. Alice was sad much of the time, a maid of constant sorrow, you might say if you like old-timey music; a depressive, if you don't.

If you're already thinking, oh no, not another story about some depressed, lonely woman who does or does not find some measure of happiness or peace, please do not stop reading. That is not what this story is about. This story mostly concerns the final days of Alice's life, and will reveal what actually happens when someone dies. And how do I, the narrator, know what happens? I know because I am Alice's soul. At this point you may ask yourself, well, if you're Alice's soul and you're writing this, why haven't other souls communicated with the living in such a straightforward way before and solved the all-consuming mystery of what happens after death?

I don't know. I'm only one soul, for God's sake. And, by the way, that's just an expression.

Alice P. had just passed her 57th birthday. What vexed her most about this age was not her loneliness, her depression, her many failures, or even the prospect of continuing to live in such an awful, awful world. No, what vexed her most was her skin. Every day, it seemed, she discovered a new insult to this once beautiful milky-silky sheath of rose-petal softness that protected her squishy insides from toxic invasion (except, of course, when she desired it) and furnished her with the sense she most enjoyed. For Alice loved nothing more than to touch and be touched. But as each new lump, bump, liver spot, spider vein, wen, cyst, skin tag, wild hair, and horny toenail assailed her; as more of her outside turned to cottage cheese and chicken hide dressed in crepe, she despaired of anyone ever wanting to touch her or be touched by her again. Except Sybil and Henry, her cats, who purred just as enthusiastically at the stroke of her hand now as they did when they were kittens a

decade ago. (They, by the way, looked perfect, fur being the operative factor here.)

Hmmpph, hmmpph, I hear you sniff, or say, or however you do it. (Souls don't really hear that well. We just . . . well, it's too hard to explain.) "How self-absorbed can you be? Really! To worry about your skin when you're lucky to have a roof over your head/a dollar in your pocket/good friends/your health/your health insurance/a job/Apple TV/etc.!" But wasn't it one of yours who said judge not lest ye be judged? I agree with that. It doesn't sound like something that comes from one of yours — one of your brains, I mean. Because "yours" doesn't mean human beings — it means brains, it means the mind and consciousness and thinking and believing and ruminating and worrying and "self-absorption." You'll understand later.

On the particular morning of which I write, Alice was reluctantly inspecting her décolletage (pardon my French!) for new evidence of the sunburn she'd suffered 40 summers ago on Martha's Vineyard when she realized something else was wrong.

I've decided not to tell you what. I am a soul, after all, and I don't want you to suffer. I don't want you to know what ailed Alice in case you or a friend or loved one have the same or a related condition. The only thing you need to know is that in Alice's case, it was too late to save her. Nor will I detail Alice's emotions on learning that she had perhaps two months left to live. Suffice it to say that once she absorbed the shock, she mourned her mostly unhappy life, feared the coming suffering, and searched frantically, and successfully, for a good home for the aged Sybil and Henry.

And so we come to the final week. Alice is in hospice. Sybil and Henry have been allowed to stay with her until the end. Such peace, such comfort she feels! Odd, isn't it? Not really, if you knew Alice as well as I did. All she ever really wanted was to be loved, cared for, touched, and held. All other accomplishments, all the normal pleasures on this earth could not fill the emptiness within. Indeed, when I first joined with her, the roominess astounded

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me. I'm not speaking literally, of course, but it's just so difficult to describe in any other way. She yearned, you see, oh, how she yearned. Such was her turn of mind.

Does this surprise you? Are you thinking that I should have said, "such was her nature" or even "such was her soul"? I suppose that's what most people think. Let me set you straight: You are born with a mind. The soul enters later, usually a few moments after birth, but sometimes as late as a month after. And sometimes a soul enters and then quickly decides to leave — tragic, but for the best. Not so the mind — it's all over you like a cheap suit, and it never leaves without a mighty struggle.

In the cocoon of hospice, Alice began to relive her life. Not remembering, but reliving, without the incessant commentary of her thoughts. Delivered at last into the care of the hospice staff, lying half-awake in a hushed and dimly lit room, gently touched, and tenderly fed, Alice could rest. Her mind could rest.

And what did Alice relive? Scenes, mostly, as if she were making a film. Sometimes not much more than an image with a sensation attached to it — the thrill of running at night down a wet, glittering city sidewalk with a man she loved, or the clutch in her chest when a solitary caged gorilla looked into her eyes.

Two days before she died, Alice began to relive the same scene over and over again:

The middle of a winter night in 1958. Alice is three years old. Her parents have startled awake to the sound of her deep, barking cough. She has the croup. While her mother holds and comforts her, her father goes into the bathroom across the hall from Alice's bedroom and starts running hot water in the tub. He returns, and her mother goes into the kitchen to squeeze oranges. Alice's bright fair hair is plastered to her head with sweat, and she cries and barks into her father's shoulder. He carries her to the bathroom, where her mother waits with fresh-squeezed

orange juice in a frosted glass etched with a black-and-white carousel pony.

Now Alice P., my Alice, lies very close to death. Her fingers pick at the thin white blanket and thin white sheet of her narrow hospice bed. The cats sleep at her feet. She closes her eyes and enters the steamy darkness of the bathroom, feels her father's arms around her as he steadies her on the edge of the tub. She breathes in the mist and takes the juice from her mother's outstretched hand. The force of her parents' love passes through her. As she lies in her hospice bed, white and narrow like the bathtub's edge, tears roll down her cheeks.

Then we part ways.

Everything that was the self of Alice P. is gone — not to another dimension or into another form, just gone. It is as it had been before she was born. And she will never be again. Make no mistake: When the body dies, consciousness, with all its pesky accoutrements, ceases to exist, forever. The light that people see when they are near death is their brain's construction of the calcium exploding inside their dying cells. As is heaven, hell, your winged granny waiting for you with a plate of cookies or whatever image your culture dictates. All constructions. Paper dolls.

I'm sorry. I hope I haven't disappointed you or made you feel the victim of a bait and switch. After all, I didn't promise that you and your soul were one and the same, now, did I? No. Think of me as a loving witness. Think of me as the lodger with no possessions, who always pays the rent on time and listens to your stories with rapt attention but knows when it's time to move on.

Speaking of which, I must decide on my next destination. I do love cats, but first, I think (as much as I ever do think, that is), I'd like to spend a bit of time with a memento of Alice P. So, if you want me, I'll be in the orange juice.