

The Note

The last time Alice had run away, she hadn't even made it out of town before the car broke down. She had saved carefully for months, and had only come up with a little over five hundred dollars, but she thought this was pretty good when she didn't work and was very careful with the household money. Unfortunately, the car had cost something over six hundred dollars to get fixed, and because she felt the breakdown was probably due, in part, to the fact that she had been running away, she had put her saved money towards the repairs.

Her husband and kids had never known that she had been on her way out.

The trick had been getting to the note she'd left before anyone else found it.

She was quite proud of that note when she'd written it. It was short and to the point. No extraneous details. Alice prided herself on her efficient writing. But when she read the note later—after she had made a point to walk into the kitchen before her husband could get there and slip the note into her jeans pocket before it could be spotted—she realized that her efficiency could come across as rude and uncaring.

She would make sure her next note sounded nicer.

When she had slipped the note into her pocket, she made note that both of the kids were already home from school. She hadn't really been worried about them actually looking for a note, but she was happy she had gotten away with it undetected, nonetheless.

Her husband probably wouldn't have found the note right away, either, if he'd come home at his usual time.

This is how she imagined the scene:

John comes home from work. He walks through the house without saying hi to the kids and they don't say hi to him. He doesn't see Alice right away, but he expected that because the car wasn't in the driveway.

“Hey, guys,” he would say. “Where’s Mom?”

He was starting to get hungry and wanted to ask what was for dinner.

“I don’t know,” first one child and then the other would reply.

“Did you call her?” John would ask.

*“No,” one child would reply. No response from the other. He might have shaken his head—
that’s audible, right?*

*John pulls out his phone and dials. Straight to voicemail. Maybe she went to the park or the
store and her phone died. He would wait a half hour or so and try again. Maybe he would think about
making pancakes for dinner, but he wouldn’t be sure if something else had been planned.*

This is where Alice’s imagination would fail her. She wondered how long it would take before something was done about food. Before John started to worry that something had happened to her. Surely some time during this period someone would go into the dining room and find the note and then everything would be clear. She would just have to work on making the note sound nicer. She didn’t want to be gone forever.

Alice’s second note was nicer. It said that she loved her family but just needed to be gone for a few days. She had her predetermined amount of five hundred dollars again, but she, quite realistically, knew that would not last very long.

This time she made it out of town, at least. The car was running smoothly and she had the things she thought would make her most comfortable on her trip. She really wanted to bring the dog with her, but she thought that would be too cruel for her younger son, who loved the dog. But she worried that the dog would feel neglected with her gone. She thought her husband and the kids would be fine. They were smart people. But the dog couldn’t let himself outside when he needed to use the bathroom and he always followed her around all day long, moving the location where he was napping or sitting to always be in the same room she was in.

But her son might worry more about the dog than about her. She would hate to come home and

have her son be unwelcoming just because she took the dog with her. He would whine and complain about how mean she was. That he really missed the dog and couldn't believe she would do that. Alice wanted her family to miss her and want her back. She thought they could forgive her leaving, but her youngest Michael would not be able to forgive her taking the dog.

Twenty miles outside town, Alice got a text from her older son Will. She had forgotten to turn her cell phone off and he needed to know if she'd be able to come to his tennis match that afternoon. He was going to be playing this time. He had never played before. She always went to the home matches and brought him food and sat in the cold and never got to see him play. She didn't answer the text right away. She looked at the time. It was close to five. She had chosen a day with a tennis match because she knew Will would not need to be picked up from the school until after her husband had gotten home from work. The note probably wouldn't have been found, still, at this point, and after Will tried to call his mom without an answer, he would eventually try his father.

Alice turned the car around.

First she had to get home and remove the nicer note. Then she popped a couple frozen burritos in the microwave until they were nice and hot, asked Michael if he wanted to go to the tennis match with her, "Will's going to get to play today." He said no. She wrapped the burritos in heavy-duty aluminum foil, grabbed a book, and went to the high school.

It was a warmer day, but with the breeze, Alice was still glad she had her jacket with her. She tried to watch the match, but it was hard because she really didn't know anything about tennis. She watched Will off and on and the way he interacted with his friends. She didn't talk to any of the other parents or the coach. The other parents of high school kids always seemed so much older than she was. Maybe they had waited until they were in their late twenties or thirties to start having kids. Maybe the kids they had in high school now were younger siblings of other children they had had when they were younger. Will was her oldest and Alice was not quite forty. But forty was coming soon.

After a couple hours of trying to watch tennis and trying to get some of her book read (it was a

library book, but not due for a couple weeks still), Alice realized Will was not going to get to play after all. She went and sat next to him on the bleachers.

“What's going on?” she asked.

He looked up from his Algebra homework. He didn't say anything.

“Are you going to get to play?” she prompted again. It had taken less time than usual for her to feel like she was an unwelcome intrusion.

“I don't think so,” Will said. “You can go home if you want.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

Will grinned. “Yes.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “How much longer is the match?”

“It's almost over.”

“Then I'll stay. I'm not going to go home and then turn right around to come back. That's a waste.”

Will shrugged his shoulders.

Alice looked out over the tennis courts and shivered with the breeze. “I am going to go wait in the car, though.”

Will just nodded and turned back to his homework.

In the car, Alice wondered if she was just not committed to this running-away thing. It hadn't taken much to make her turn around. Although if she had just turned off her phone she wouldn't have known that there was a reason to turn around. Next time she would have to remember that. She assumed that no matter what she would feel guilty about one thing or another. Either she would feel guilty that she was making things so hard on everyone by not being there to do her job, or she would feel terrible that everyone got along supremely well without her.

That's when she realized that she had to have some way beyond just what her family would say when she returned to know if they really were worse off without her or if they were just fine. She had

to make sure the house was in tip-top shape. Cleaned top to bottom, all the little projects taken care of.

Over the next few weeks, Alice threw herself into her work. And she continued to hide away a little bit of cash here and there to add to her stockpile. She started with the upstairs and cleaned every last corner of every single room. She cleaned the stairs meticulously and was about to start with the downstairs when she realized that the upstairs was just dirty again. So she doubled her efforts. She picked one thing upstairs to clean each day and paired it with one thing downstairs. But she still couldn't stay ahead of the dirt.

Every day she watered the flowers and the garden, knowing that all of these plants would probably die while she was gone. It was a shame because she had put a lot of time into it.

She measured and cut wood for shelves she had been meaning to hang in the living room. She spent days sanding and smoothing each shelf before staining and finishing each one. She bought a can of paint and worked on painting the windows in the kitchen and dining room. Then she bought another can of paint to finish painting the walls in the same area.

Then she started the cleaning process again. She tried to get the kids to help with the cleaning when they were home. She put her husband's clothes and things on his side of the bed so he would have to put them away before he went to bed at night. Then the next day she picked up those same things and put them back on the bed.

Alice was a whirlwind of activity. One day she sat down to survey her dirty house with the newly-hung shelves and the nicely-painted kitchen with dishes all over the counter and the nicely-painted dining room with the paper and mail strewn all over the table and the dirt and pet hair in the corners, and she realized her kids only had three weeks left of school before summer break. She couldn't leave in the summer time. At least with school in session, the kids would have something to organize a good portion of the day for them when she was gone. She had to leave now, or wait for the fall.

Alice made herself a cup of coffee and sat on the porch to think it over. She watched the birds

at the feeder and surveyed the progress of the plants she had planted. It was Tuesday. She sat in her chair and drank her coffee that she had made with the single-cup coffee maker she and the kids used—she used it for coffee and they used it to make hot water for different powdered drinks—and she realized that she liked her single-cup coffee maker. She didn't like the coffee makers found in hotel rooms that had the carafe. She liked to be able to make one cup of coffee that went right into the mug she was drinking out of. And she had been liking coffee a lot more recently.

Was this just another excuse to put off leaving? Did she really want to go, or was it just a fantasy she was holding on to to keep herself from being happy in her life? She didn't have a bad life. She kept busy during the day making no apparent progress in any area. She spent her time joyfully with her children in the evenings yelling at them to try to get them to be more productive and help out and stop arguing with everything she said. And there were the times when they actually did get along and laugh and joke around. She wasn't discounting those times. John had his moments, too, when there was nothing he wanted from her, no demands on her time, when they could just be. When it was quiet and they enjoyed the peace.

So what it came down to was whether or not Alice could get along without the coffee maker for a few days.

She got up and went to Amazon on her laptop, found the coffee maker they used and bought it. It would come in two days, Thursday. She would leave on Friday.

Alice spent the next couple days preparing in ways she had not prepared on her previous two attempts. The first two times she had left, she had just thrown some clothes in a bag and taken off in the car. This time she started to load things into the car right away. She packed the camp stove and cans of food. She got down a bigger bag and filled it with her favorite, comfortable clothes. She made a list of things that would be missed but that she wanted to take with her, so she would have to grab them on Friday morning. Things like a lawn chair and the food she wanted to put in the cooler. She set the timer in the kitchen throughout the day so she could make ice over and over. She bought some

more cone coffee filters in anticipation of the coffee maker coming. She went to the library and checked out several more books and made sure the books she had were renewed. She did the budget and made a list of passwords and login information so John could take care of everything while she was gone.

And she wondered why she couldn't just tell everyone she was leaving for a few days so they wouldn't worry or wonder if she was okay.

But she knew the reason why. She didn't want to see that look of disappointment in John's eyes when he asked why she didn't want to be with him. The way he didn't understand her need to just be away. If she didn't tell him then she wouldn't have to deal with that look until it was all over.

She didn't want to field the endless questions from the kids about who would take care of them or how long exactly she would be gone. Or, worse, the grunts that said they had heard her say she was leaving but they couldn't be bothered to give it any real thought right now.

So she would just quietly leave. She would leave her note: *I just had to get away. I'll be back in a few days if you still want me.*

She opted for short and to-the-point. She didn't want to assume that anyone would be heartbroken or upset that she was gone. They might not even miss her. It could be a vacation for everyone. This thought heartened her and saddened her at the same time.

She went in the garage and got her sleeping bag, and then went upstairs to clean the bathrooms.

On Thursday, she expected the UPS truck in the afternoon. Usually the truck came and elicited hardly any curiosity from anyone, so she could just take the package upstairs to put the coffee maker in her stuff and then dispose of the box in the recycling trash. So she spent the day cleaning and waiting. She made bread in the morning and when it cooled she sliced it up and added it to her things. Then she made bread in the afternoon to be eaten with dinner.

When Michael got home from school, she had him do the dishes before he went outside with his friends. The UPS truck came when he was down the street, so she didn't have to consider prying eyes.

Will came home from school later than Michael, and Alice made him clean the downstairs bathroom and pick up his room before he went to his room to read and probably take a nap.

Alice made spaghetti and meatballs for dinner to go with the fresh bread and a salad, and she peeled some carrots while the sauce was simmering that she put in a ziplock bag to add to the cooler in the morning. She made a note in her phone to not forget the carrots.

John came home from work and didn't comment on the fact that she had managed to clean the entire house in one day, and she made some spaghetti noodles and they sat down to dinner. Michael grumbled that he had to come in when everyone else was still playing. Will sat sullenly in his chair looking half asleep still and making it clear he didn't want anyone to talk to him. John asked Alice three times if she was okay until she told him to stop asking her that.

The kids went to bed on time and John and Alice stayed up watching a couple funny shows before going to bed and making love for the first time in two months.

John left for work before Alice woke up with the kids on Friday morning. She got them out the door with a minimal amount of yelling and complaining and then she made herself a cup of coffee. While it was brewing, she carried everything out to the car that she had not carried out already. It had been easy to hide everything in the back of the car for two days. No one ever looked back there. She put the food in the cooler and added the ice she had been stockpiling for two days. Then she sat on the back porch with the dog and drank her coffee. She watered all the plants, fed the animals, washed out her coffee mug, filled a water bottle, got in the car, started it up, and drove away.

She was almost out of the neighborhood when she realized she forgot to leave her note on the table.