

ALICE, 1973

The snow had started early. Before dawn. Alice woke just as it was getting light and saw the white flakes falling. With any luck it would continue through the day and by nightfall the city would have come to a complete standstill. She closed her eyes and drifted into a dreamless sleep. At nine, the phone woke her.

“Hello?” She was still in the tunnel of sleep.

“Hello. I’m calling about the ad in the paper...I hope I haven’t woken you.”

“That’s OK. What are you interested in?”

“Well, I was interested in all three items.” She looked up and saw that the snow was continuing to fall. It had gotten heavier with huge thick flakes. “I’d like to see them. Could I come over today sometime?”

“Sure.” She thought, not early, not too late. “How about two?”

“Two?” He paused. “Yes. That would be fine. Where do you live?”

“West Village. Do you know it at all?” She gave him directions, hung up and slowly pulled herself out of bed.

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Alice had been placing ads in the paper for about a week. Her boyfriend, Geoffrey, had left some of his stuff at her apartment and gone to Hawaii to do this forty-day spiritual training, Arica. He’d left his coffee table, color TV and stereo. Alice had been enjoying these items in her living room for about six weeks. She could sit and put her feet up, read a magazine, listen to music, watch TV, if she liked. She’d been hoping that she could just keep them, hoping that Geoffrey would forget about them and lump them in with the overall horror he felt in general for New York City.

He couldn’t touch her bedroom, however. This was all hers; the bed, the antique blanket chest, the ladder back chair and the painting of the field. Her mother had given her these things when she first moved in.

“Your grandfather gave this to me when I married your father,” her mother said as she pushed at the blanket chest to center it. She felt for dust across the smooth uneven pine top. “Oil it with Formby’s.” She stepped back to look at the old chest. “It seems silly to have to wait to marry before you can have your nice things.” She looked at her daughter. “Besides, you may not marry for awhile. You never know...nothing wrong with that, by the way.”

“I know,” Alice said.

“Florrie Forbes didn’t marry until she was 49.”

“I know.”

Her mother surveyed the room. “I want you to have the painting of the field.”

“Oh!...Mom...it’s too good. You love it too much!”

“I want you to have it. It would comfort you, Al.”

Her mother walked over to the tall arched windows that overlooked scores of West Village rooftops. “Heavenly view. Lots of sky.” She turned and smiled at Alice. “You’ll have sunsets from here, Allie.”

Alice joined her at the window.

“What is that building? The pink stucco?”

“The moon building,” Alice said.

“Oh, yes...I see...funny.”

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Alice had taken the apartment largely because of the view. It happened to be directly across from what she referred to in her mind as the moon building; a pink stucco affair with a very peculiar half moon on the roof. That is, the roof took an unexpected turn above a high gabled window and swept up in a rather grand crescent moon shape. It wasn’t ornate and though she didn’t see the exact reason

for it, it provided a surprise in the midst of all the straight lines and right angles of the city that she could see from her windows. Her apartment was on the top floor of a six-floor walk-up, a pre-war railroad apartment; four square rooms with ten-foot ceilings, one right after the other. She didn't mind the climb. Geoffrey wasn't wild about it, though. He'd called the week before from Hawaii after just completing his spiritual training.

"Geoffrey?"

"The one and only." His voice was very distinct for being half way around the world.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Perfect."

"What time is it?" she asked feeling shaken to be woken from such deep sleep.

"Time to wake up. Time to be here now."

Alice picked up the clock and held it up to the light of the streetlamp glancing through her window - 3:30 am. It's pretty late, Geoffrey."

"Time was invented so that everything doesn't happen at once, dolphin. It would be just too much for our unexpanded minds."

"Oh..." Alice said shifting from one bare foot to the other.

"Listen, I think I'm going to stay here for a couple of more weeks. There's a very far out hike we're going to take. And then possibly a little bit of traveling...I'm not sure."

"Where are you going?"

"So could you sell the TV, table and stereo?"

"Yeah, sure," Alice said.

"Don't take less than \$200 for the Zenith and just get as much as you can for the other stuff."

"OK."

“I don’t think I’ll be coming back to New York for any length of time. I just can’t live in such a tomassic place.”

“What’s that?”

“Hindu word for death. I’m just not a happy dolphin swimming around in that tank. You know how it affects me.”

“I know.” Alice shivered in the late night cold. Winter was just around the corner. The skies were gray and there seemed to be little atmosphere. Just cold stillness.

“So I’m going on this hike with some of my friends from the course who’ve been there. I just want to give up my material possessions. Just give up all attachment to all things.”

“Yeah, OK,” Alice said, squatting down to hug her knees.

“Maui is amazing, dolphin. It is totally groovy here. The whole place is filled with devas and spirits. It’s very high here.”

“What’re devas...like...?”

“Little spirit beings that inhabit high places. They’re like happy little guys who just want to groove and stay around high people.”

“So who else are you traveling with?”

“God, well, there’s one of the trainers who is a black belt in about fourteen martial arts. He’s totally far out. And he’s got this little band of totally tumesced ladies just following him around, kind of waiting on him hand and foot. They’re into service.”

“Tumesced?”

“Sexually aroused, dolphin. Arica is into sex as a means, well, one of the means to enlightenment.

“Oh.”

“And then there’s Kathleen. A Rolpher. Completely far out woman. She’s worked on me a lot. We’re very close.” He paused. “Henry came out. He got

tired of bagging tea in Boulder, so he sold a few stocks and flew out here first class. He's very far out. Very into hedonism."

"So you're getting worked on a lot?"

"Yeah. Kathleen says that I have lifetimes of stress in my lower back and she's got me on a special diet – seaweed, tofu..."

"Wow."

"You'd really like her, dolphin. Anyway, you may just have to join me in San Francisco. We all want to get a house there together. I really don't know whether I can handle New York at all."

"Goeffrey, I really don't know if I want to live with a lot of people I've never met."

"Come on, dolphin, these people are very far out."

"Yeah, well, I don't know, Geoffrey." She was looking intently at the floor. "I'm not a very social person, exactly."

"Whatever, dolphin, it's all perfect. " The long distance wires hummed across the continent and half way across the Pacific Ocean. "Maybe you'd like my stereo? You can have it for \$175."

"Maybe. I'll let you know."

"Well, I have to go. It's pretty late for you, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's almost four in the morning." Alice shivered again.

"So as soon as you sell the stuff could you send me the money in a money order?"

"Sure."

"Far out."

"OK."

"Listen, I want you to do Arica. It has blown my mind about relationships and things. We limit ourselves by thinking we can love only one person at a time."

"We do?." Alice ran her finger along the bare wood floor tracing the grain.

"Oh, also, could you send me a large supply of that hair conditioner, the one

that's made from embryos or something? My hair is drying out in this tropical sun and Mother's convinced that it will keep my hair from getting wrecked totally."

"OK."

"You OK?"

"I'm OK, yeah. It's gotten really cold here, feels like it wants to snow."

"God, I'm glad I'm not there."

"It's nice here." She started to shiver in earnest in her thin t-shirt and bare feet.

"It's unbelievable here. I went swimming today. Twice."

"It's going to snow soon. You can feel winter in the air. Everything's very still."

"Like I said, I'm glad I'm not there."

"I like winter, I even like being cold sometimes." Her voice was shaking.

"Well, dolphin, maybe I'll see you in San Francisco in warmer waters."

"The water's colder there than here. No Gulf Stream."

"Oh, well, whatever. Listen, dolphin, later."

Alice listened to the very far away click and the local New York dial tone buzz. She slowly hung up the phone, hugging her shaking knees. She climbed into bed and layed there shivering for a long time, staring into the dark night sky. Alice finally fell asleep just as the sun was rising in a cold gray sky, so glad that winter was almost there.

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The snow had continued through the morning. She'd watched it get heavier as she baked some bread. It seemed the right thing to do on a day like this. She'd seen her sisters bake bread. She'd seen Geoffrey's ex-wife, Prudence, bake bread. Punch the dough down, let it rise, punch it down again. Knead it, bake it. It wasn't

so difficult, just took time. Particularly the clean up. She was in the middle of it when the buzzer from downstairs rang.

She rang the door open with her elbow and quickly tried to sweep up the flour that was covering the entire floor. Prudence never seemed to make the mess that she did. In fact, she seemed to do everything with finesse. She was a phenomenal cook. She had perfect feet and legs and always looked beautiful without a shred of makeup. She was also a phenomenal weaver. Her loom took up most of the living room. She spun her own goddamn yarn.

Alice never understood why Geoffrey and Prudence split up. They were so unerringly hip. She was a perfect hippy, mother, wife and liberated woman. But they had tried everything; open marriage, farming in British Columbia, living in a teepee, having a child and the straw that broke Prudence's back, Alice guessed, was law school. Geoffrey enrolled in law school. He was allegedly going to support New Age concerns. But he was mostly going so he could learn how to manage the not inconsiderable fortune he was about to inherit from his father. Alice guessed Prudence's ideals had been violated or something; as a hip and liberated woman; alimony notwithstanding.

There were two knocks on the door.

"One minute!" Alice went to the sink and tried to rinse off the sticky dough from her hands. The bread was done, she turned off the oven and went to open the door.

A tall thin young man greeted her with raised eyebrows, holding his fogged up glasses in one hand. He offered her his other. His overcoat was covered with melting snow and he was unaffected by the six flights of stairs.

"How do you do. I'm John."

"Hi. Alice. Come in."

"Thank you." He stamped his feet in the hall before entering the kitchen.

"Ah, it's warm in here."

"Is it very cold out?" Alice asked.

“No, not really. It’s not bitter out. It’s actually wonderful out. Feet just got a bit wet.” He smiled at her. He was standing in the middle of the kitchen with his coat dripping. He felt his hair gingerly and brushed off some snow. “Oh, sorry. I’m dripping all over your kitchen.” He laughed and shuffled over to the door and opened it and shook his head into the hall. He then took off his coat and shook it like a big sheet. He folded it over his arm and returned closing the door behind him.

He stood again in the middle of the kitchen looking at her with large brown eyes and folded arms, holding his coat, stooping slightly. “Well, this is the first snow we’ve had this year, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said. He was just standing there, arms folded, coat folded, feet planted. “Be careful you don’t slip n the floor. It’s covered with flour.”

He looked down and then looked back at her and smiled. “OK.”

“Are there many people stuck?”

“Couple of cars. It’s coming down. Things are slowing down.”

“Would you like to sit for a moment?” she asked.

“Thank you, I would.” He sat in one of the chairs by the kitchen table.

“Would you like some bread? It’s just finished.”

His eyebrows raised up. “I’d love some, yes, thank you.”

She pulled the golden brown loaf from the oven. It looked perfect. She placed it with a knife on the table.

“Butter?” She put the softened sweet butter on the table.

“Oh...yes. Thank you. Wonderful.”

She dove into the fridge and handed him homemade jam – made by her sister. “Oh, how about some coffee?”

“Yes, please...may I help?”

“No, I was about to have some myself. You could slice the bread.” She handed him the knife, handle first. He cut the bread slowly and with concentration.

She poured boiling water over fresh grounds and brought the steaming coffee to the table. She brought milk and honey to the table. He offered her bread.

“Thank you.”

She buttered the hot bread and spread on a generous portion of grape jelly. She took a large bite and then stirred honey into her coffee and added milk. “You live in Brooklyn?”

“In Brooklyn. Yes. In a small basement studio. Me and my stag fern.” He buttered his bread and dipped his knife into the jelly jar. “And my viola.” He spread an even layer of dark purple jelly over the steaming bread. Butter ran off the bread onto his fingers.

“Oh, are you a musician?”

“Yes.”

“That’s nice.”

“It’s alright.”

She drank some coffee. “And you need furniture?”

“Actually I had some, but my girlfriend moved out and took everything with her. I don’t blame her, it was her stuff...my place was too small she said.”

“Oh.”

He looked at her for a moment. “You live here by yourself?”

“Yes.”

It was very white out the window. The normal sounds of the city were silenced under the thickening blanket of snow. A bird alighted briefly on the windowsill, its eyes darting into the fogged up kitchen window. It flew away suddenly - disappearing into the white.

“My boyfriend went out to Hawaii to do a spiritual training course and it doesn’t look like he’s coming back. So I’m selling his stuff for him. New York is too tomassic for him,” she said.

“What does that mean?”

“Death-like. It’s a Hindu term.”

“Oh.” He looked into his coffee. “Do you think he’s going to stay there?”

“He’s going to move to San Francisco.”

“Will you stay here or go out there?”

“Here.” She jumped up and looked through the foggy window. She drew a tic-tac-toe and marked three quick x’s in a diagonal row. “Look at it come down. I hope you don’t have trouble getting home.” He joined her at the window, standing behind her, looking out.

“Big flakes,” he said. “No, I’m meeting my girlfriend and then we’re going to a movie.”

“Oh.” Alice turned to look at him. His flannel shirt was unbuttoned at the neck and a small bit of navy blue undershirt was showing. His collar was damp. “You still see your girlfriend?”

“Yes. We’re friends.”

“That’s nice.” She rubbed out all the fog on the window and they sat back down. They ate in silence, taking large bites of warm bread with butter and jelly and washing it down with hot coffee. She looked at his hands. They were large and fine. Big palms and long articulate fingers. He wore his watch on the inside of his wrist. “You have musician’s hands.” He looked at his hands.

“What kind of hands do you have?” he asked.

“Regular.” She put her hands in her lap.

“May I see?”

She held her hands up quickly and then started to put them in her lap. He caught her hands in his and looked at them seriously.

“Strong hands.” He turned them over and back again. “You have nice hands. Strong. They’re beautiful.” He let go his grasp.

“Thank you, they’re not beautiful.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a dancer.”

“Are you dancing anywhere?”

“Yeah, in the unemployment line.”

“Unemployment. A fine thing when you can get it.”

Alice looked down. “Yeah.” They ate again in silence.

“You got pets?” she asked.

“No, just my stag fern. Do you?”

“Nope.” She stared off into the living room frowning a little. “You want to see the stuff?”

“Sure.” They walked into the living room.

“Here is the coffee table and this is the TV and the stereo,” she said pointing to all the items. “But I may keep the stereo myself.”

“It’s a good one. KLH.”

“He can get one in San Francisco. Maybe I’ll just keep this.”

“This table is nice. What do you want for it?”

“Forty dollars.”

“Hmm...and how about the TV. Does it work?”

“Does it work? It works great. It’s a Zenith.” She turned it on. “Great color, comes on right away. I’ve been watching it a lot lately.”

“A TV. That would be something to have, wouldn’t it?”

“It definitely is. Two hundred dollars.” He looked from the living room into the bedroom

“I like your bedroom.”

“Thank you. This is all mine,” she said, walking into the bedroom. “Nothing for sale.”

He stepped just inside the bedroom. “You have nice things.” He paused for a moment. “My God, what a view.”

They stood there looking out the tall arched windows.

Snow was falling from a slate sky. The world was dappled white. Everything straight and angled was rounded; the city had been transformed into a land of blurry white shapes. All the rooftops and window ledges and fire escapes

were dressed with soft new fallen snow. Alice and John stood next to each other, just inside the bedroom, staring into the world.

A light shone in one of the gabled windows of the moon building and a small movement drew Alice's attention. There was something but she couldn't see just what. Something moving very gently, rocking. A rocking horse. She'd never noticed that before in that window. But then it changed shape slightly and seemed to rock from two different angles. She felt John immediately next to her standing perfectly still and silent, also watching. They stood there saying nothing. And then Alice saw what it was. And she saw how the shape changed again moving from two back into one. The snow kept falling and she could hear kids playing in the street and their muffled cries. A school bell rang somewhere far off. They must have let out early. Cars had stopped altogether. The city had come to a slow and quiet halt.

"They're making love," she said.

"Yes."

"I've never seen it before."

"No. I haven't either."

They stood for a moment longer, watching through the soft focus of falling snow. It swirled from the sky like feathers from a ripped eiderdown quilt. The crescent moon had quite a fine point of snow on it by now. She looked at him. He was frowning slightly. His dark brown eyes were staring into the white. He turned slowly and looked at her. She looked down. When she looked up, he was staring back out into the white.

"I don't think I'll take anything, Alice...I think I'll leave my place empty for awhile longer."

"Ok," Alice said.

"It helps me think. But thank you."

"You're welcome."

“Thank you for the bread and coffee.”

Alice smiled.

“And for the jelly.”

“It’s made from grapes back home.”

He stood looking down into her eyes.

“Near the ocean,” she said. “We picked them in early October.”

“You did?”

“In Massachusetts.”

“You grew up there...is that where this painting is?”

“Yes.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Yes.”

Alice looked back out at the storm. The couple in the window was still; a white mound under covers. Chimes from the Congregational Church three blocks away were barely audible.

She drew a quick breath and then exhaled slowly. She thought of her mother telling her about the Canada Geese when she was a child. How they almost always flew before the first snow. It had been cold for a while; the sun had been locked far away in an iron sky. Her mother was driving the carpool home from school one November afternoon when she suddenly pulled over to the side of the road, stopped the car and made everyone get out.

“Look!” she cried, her voice breaking, as she pointed a gloved finger to a perfect V formation of at least three hundred Canada Geese honking and flying south through the slate gray early winter sky as the first flakes of snow began to fall. She turned back to him.

“Would you like the stereo?” Alice asked.

“No, I...”

“You can have it.”

“I can’t afford it.”

“Will you let me just give it to you?”

“Doesn’t this belong to your friend?”

“He’ll be glad,” Alice said smiling, picking it up and handing it to him.

“I can’t accept this. But thank you.” John placed the stereo carefully back on the table.

“Are you sure? It’s a very nice one,” Alice said running her hand over the dusty top.

“Please don’t be offended...maybe there’s someone you know who would like it?”

“How about the table or the TV?” she asked.

“No, Alice. But thank you.”

“No?”

“I guess I want to give up certain attachments as well,” he said, smiling.

“Oh, OK,” she said.

“I would like to be free as well,” he said.

“I understand.”

“Is that field a real place?” he asked, nodding towards the painting.

“It’s close to a real place.”

“Near where you lived?”

“In the winter the swamp next to that place would freeze over and...”

John took her hands in his. “And you would go skating.”

“Yes,” she said. John stood for a moment looking at her. He leaned down and kissed her gently.

“Have you ever been to Brooklyn?”

“No, I’ve never been.”

“I’d like to show you Brooklyn. Would you consider coming for a visit?” He said smiling.

“I would. Yes.”

“There are some very interesting places not everyone knows about.”

“I’d love to see them.”

They walked back into the kitchen and John put on his coat. Alice opened the door for him.

“Could you help me carry some things downstairs?” she asked. John looked at her confused.

“Alright.”

“Do you think you can carry the TV?”

“Think so.” He picked it up.

“Can you carry this all the way down six flights, do you think?”

“Yes, I think,” he said walking out the door. She picked up the stereo and followed him out. “Maybe you’d like to come out tomorrow afternoon?” John said over his shoulder as they walked carefully down the six flights. “Around two?”

“Two is great.”

“Where are we going with this?” John asked.

“Just down to the street,” she said behind him.

They placed the TV and stereo under a slightly protected overhang, near some garbage cans. Alice found a large piece of cardboard and managed to cover the three items. The falling snow left a light dusting all around them.

She watched John walk down the street in the fading light of the early winter evening. Streetlights and apartment lights came on, the city glowed with a white and amber softness. She returned for the table and added it to the collection and then walked down the deserted streets of her silent neighborhood pushing her feet through the untouched snow.

The TV, stereo and table were gone when she returned. A small pile of snow had taken their place. She found Geoffrey’s number and dialed all the way to Hawaii. He answered right away.

“Hi, dolphin...how are you?”

"We're having a great snow storm here," she said.

"Oh."

"The city is absolutely still and white."

"Just wait a couple of days."

"Everything's stopped...it's so quiet."

"So, did you sell my stuff?"

"How was your hike?"

"Pretty groovy. Pretty far out. One of the women broke her ankle but we handled it...we were pretty high, I guess. Henry brought pure psilocybin and she thought she could fly...so anyway,...it was a little weird." Alice curled her feet under her on the couch.

"Yeah."

"So did you sell my stuff?"

"I gave it away."

Geoffrey paused for a moment and Alice could hear a faint whine through the long distant wires.

"What do you mean you gave it away?"

"I got that it would be extremely cool to give your stuff back," Alice said.

"Give it back? What do you mean?"

"I knew that you wanted to give up all attachment to all things and so I thought that I would just make a gift of your things."

"But that stuff was mine. Not yours."

"Not really, Geoffrey...not in the overall scheme of things."

"Jesus, Alice."

"It'll come back to you, Geoffrey."

"What do you mean, give it back?"

"It's important to give things back to the world. We get a lot for free, you know," she said.

"Quite the metaphysical dolphin...what about the hair conditioner?"

“Oh, I didn’t find out.”

“Kiehl’s carries it...you could call them.”

“Why don’t you call them?”

“Never mind, I’ll get Mother to do it.”

When they said goodbye, Alice sat and listened to the hum of the long distant wires, waiting for the sound of Geoffrey’s voice to trace its way back across the continent and halfway across the ocean. She then hung up and wrapped her arms around her knees hugging them tightly into her chest, basking in the dim glow of the snow-covered streetlights barely visible from her windows.