

Faith and Fear

Sitting by the window and sipping on her wine, she said to Ewan, who was standing next to her, ‘The sentence of my year has been “fluctuating between faith and fear”’, and he answered ‘That’s good. You’ve got the alliteration going too’, and Alice smiled because she was proud of the alliteration too. He was watching the little people all the way in the distance at the top of the hill, but she couldn’t see them because she never wore her glasses.

It was Alice’s last evening in Edinburgh. She had been packing her bags all day and hadn’t finished yet, but she would have to by the end of the night because her flight was early the next morning. Soon she would be on a plane back home, and she would have to build her strength up because it wasn’t right to cry like a little girl when things didn’t go exactly her way and it would be a shame to disregard all the renovations that had occurred in the confines of her skull. In these four years, Alice had made a remarkable efforts in growing up and acting like a sensible adult. She finally had friends, and great friends too, from all over the world, who even found her funny.

To celebrate her success and engrain herself in everyone’s mind forever, she organised an evening of sensible debauchery and invited absolutely everyone. Alice was never too strict on the scale of guests, as her crave for attention surpassed the rules of courtesy she liked to instil. In the kitchen, Ewan, her young page, was useless; so, he kept her company while the other boys — or *men*, if you prefer — were chopping the meat, preparing the rice, steaming the vegetables. Then, suddenly, Jack, her flatmate who was never convinced by anything or anyone, jumped out of his chopping duties with two bags of garlic hanging between his legs, his back hunched up and his pelvis bursting forward like a medieval jester. Chaos in the kitchen. Vegetables flying everywhere, Jack jumping around, a glass falls and tension rises. Alice looked around and briskly moved like an electrified squirrel to clean the mess up. Ewan noticed her move to the high pitched tones he took so

long to get used to. He then took a towel and wipes things up, calm down, sit here, he breathed and looks out of the window. Fine, I'll let you to it. Alice's mind began to clear up again, just like the fast-paced clouds out in the distance. Now all this belongs to her memory, a four-year-long film written, directed, edited, by none other but herself, projected every night in her mind before she goes bed. Remember that great scene, with Jack and the jumping garlic? It was all part of it, a giant moving scrapbook of smells and three-dimensional events, perfectly stored in her mind forever. That was Alice's great escape.

The other girls were late as usual because they were too busy getting drunk on white wine and then buying some more at the corner shop. Alice didn't mind staying with her male escorts for a while, it made her feel more powerful in a moment like this. Alice was convinced women were highly irrational creatures; so she always preferred to surround herself with men who seemed to offer her more stability, like Ewan, for example. She finally stood up and began setting up the living-room the way she did whenever she hosted dinners: like a Roman dining hall, with pillows spread out on the floor and clinically arranged low coffee-tables, adorned with Ikea candles, which portended highly flammable risks that were so easily ignored.

When the guests arrived, Alice hosted lazily. It was uncommon for her to do so, but everyone seemed to excuse it, including herself, because it's frustrating to see someone try to be perfect all the time. It was clear that the epidemic of numbness had finally reached Alice as it had her more precocious friends who were confronted to the prospects of prospects. The truth was that the empire Alice had so gloriously built — or so she would like to believe — was falling apart, with each of its founding members dispersing to all corners of the world. This is no exaggeration: they were living in a time when travel was the source of gold and gold preceded everything.

Through a cold oval window, right above the world, darkness seems to be the only presence. Everything and everyone around is but a sleeping spectre. Alice, half-awake, looks out into the void, then when it has been too long, she turns her head to the snoring woman next to her. Two worlds in one capsule. For the first time, she sees stars in the impenetrable darkness, and feels the immensity of what awaits her below. Transfixed, she watches the sun slowly rise in a pink hue; soon, she'll be back on the continent.

Her bags hadn't touched the floor as her family was already finding a way to get her out of the house. 'Alice, wouldn't you like to go to Brittany for a bit, relax and have so sun? You look so pale! Go ahead, go for the week-end, what will you do here?'

'Mother, help me settle in a bit, and let's talk about it later,' Alice said, making use of her newly acquired anger-containing skills.

'Oh right, right...'

Alice's mother was a small French woman identical to her but with more lines of sorrow graved on her face. She was a terrible cook and still she insisted on attempting another meal every evening for the past 20 years. At the dinner table stood a semi-globe of over cooked rice, perfectly erect, next to the sad cadavre of a chicken. There she was, back at the cramped up table with her fascist little brother, pre-pubescent sister and the favorite golden baby boy, all in their assigned seats, with the father at the head, checking his watch. She could tell he was already disappointed. No news from other schools, no applications, no initiative, just a waste of time, studying some philosophical nonsense that would get her nowhere. There she was, just another investment put to waste. Her mother gives her the look of a helpless ally. Alice tries to swallow the dry meat but her father's words seems to freeze her vital organs.

'Well, sure, here's an idea, you should just go to Brittany and work there until *you* have an idea of what *you* should do with you life,' says the father, 'learn how to be alone and take care of a big

house.’ Alice gulped down the dry chunk along with the whole glass of Victorian wine. Was there really any space to argue?

It was the middle of May and the weather had begun to clear up, despite the rough winds. Nobody waited for her at the train station and that was a strange feeling. It was the first time she was going to the little island all alone. The other passengers had all arrived at their final destination, but she still had a longer way to go. As she walked through the grey, hooded town, from the old train station to the port, she realised for the first time how much it looked like Edinburgh. Perhaps this would be a buffer zone for the rest of her life, she thought, perhaps islands were her purgatory. She got on the ferry and stood outside. The small waves, always moving, made the sea look like a flat piece of metal with furtive lights being projected at quantic speeds; like stars eclipsing from one corner to another in fast forward. The sea, usually soft and round, had become sharp and brutal, reflecting cosmic chaos. Alice began regretting the glacial island hopping but now it was too late, she was already on her way. The trip on the ferry felt longer than usual, because she couldn’t see anything with all the water and wind in her eyes. It seems like the less you see the less you know where time goes. Once she got off the ferry she sat and waited for Remy, the neighbour who agreed to pick her up at the café, *La Vraie Croix*. Alice waited and waited but the only person who came out to greet her was Elsa, the owner, who started bombarding her with the usual out-of-uni small-talk. Alice somehow managed to invent some brilliant future for herself as a successful writer which did not impress Elsa who said: ‘all you kids want to be writers and movie stars these days. Who’s going to take care of us when we’re old?’.

Remy was taking a very long time to arrive, and Alice debated whether she should call him again, but after all, he was an old man and quickness was not amongst his greatest abilities. She

wondered what was, she hardly knew the man, all she knew was that her father despised him deeply. Perhaps Remy was taking this long in order to show his disdain towards her and her family. Impossible to know for sure. The longer she waited the longer she craved an ice cream. Well, she thought, it's her first day of freedom after all and she could get an ice cream if she wanted; but she took so long to decide which flavour she wanted that when Remy finally arrived to pick her up, she rushed to the car with ice cream dripping all over her bags, forcing the old man to carry them to the trunk as she licked the sugar off her fingers in the passenger seat. Ice cream had become a symbol of shame. The car ride was awfully long and quiet.

When they finally arrived in front of the mansion, it took Alice some time to open the door. She had a feeling someone was waiting for her inside and the more she waited in front of the door the more fear gripped her by the throat. She was sure, but unable to prove, that a great big thing, like some huge cloud, would burst out and engulf her the moment she opened that door. She kept imagining it and all the different ways she would suffocate and die, or how maybe there was an intruder that had been living there for months, and who left on the weekends when her family was there, and wouldn't be expecting her so he would shoot her instantly with her grandfather's shot gun the moment she walked in. After a few minutes, she finally opened the door because she could feel Remy watching her from a distance. He was probably already thinking that she was some kind of bourgeois idiot who didn't know how to eat ice cream in a cone.

The house was cold and empty. She dropped her big red suitcase, and the several bags of provisions her parents had given her and ran up to a room as if to find shelter from the heavy emptiness of the house and turned the radio on the big speakers. She could never stand silence.

It was a traditional stone mansion, built in the early 19th century, with dark beams protruding all over the place, reminders of the spirit of order it was built upon. The decoration had stayed practically intact from its last renovation in the 1930's, back when Remy's parents owned the

house. Many details of the house, like the bannisters and door frames, were painted in a light royal blue. The bedrooms had kept their original pastoral wallpaper which made Alice feel cozy. These antique decors reminded her of a time when the world wasn't corrupted by numbers quickly changing in large towers filled with freaks on the phone.

Yet, for the first time, the walls, the wooden objects and the breezy chimneys made her feel vulnerable. She was already anticipating the fear at night, when the lights would go out and she would be left alone in this great big, empty house. Stories she had grown up with suddenly came knocking at her mind's door. Like the one of the young couple who had just gotten married, and, the night of their wedding day, the ghost of a secret late wife came in to take the young bride away from her groom. Shivers now traveling throughout her body, she stood up and decided to unpack. This took some time and enough concentration to distract her from the impending, stabbing loneliness she was about to face. Though Alice had had grown up amongst hundreds of cousins and siblings, in moments like these, she felt just like an orphan. It was the same feeling she had when she arrived in Edinburgh the first year. By the time there was nothing left to organise, she found herself crying on her bed. Crying and crying, like a child lost in the forest. What would a good-for-nothing girl like her do? She would have to spend whole life alone with her angry and judgemental parents, taking care of her bratty siblings and remain forever a virgin. It's so so hard to be a person, she said to herself. Then, still sobbing, she stood up and looked at her swollen red face shake in front of the mirror. God, she looked awful, and she immediately realised how silly she was. She went down to the living room, ate a piece of bread and ended up watching some silly thing on television because television is the best antidote against the vengeful spirits of the night.

Half asleep, her eyes still closed, Alice took the remote and turned the incessant news reel off. Then, she fell back into deep slumber, alone on the blue sofa, surrounded by a few friendly lights protecting her from the *dame blanche* or any banshee that may come her way. But the light

couldn't guard her mind, which was slowly visited by strange dreams. A cloud of red smoke invaded her, and within it a dark light comes closer. In the light was Sam, a friend of hers who had died in their first year at university. Sam invites Alice to play volleyball. In the place of a net was a paper door with a small window above, through which they would have to throw the ball, made of sand. Alice then said 'this isn't a volleyball, this is nonsense' and everyone turned around and looked at her:

'Play the game, or leave forever', answers the girl.

Alice played but every movement was slow and the girls struggled to even throw the ball properly through the window. The girls on the team across were very young, she couldn't recognise any of them. Suddenly Sam pushes Alice to the ground and screams 'don't you see what's going on? You'll see, you'll do what I did! You'll do it, there's no way out!'. And then Alice woke up in tears.

In the morning, Alice decided she wouldn't go through such dread again, so she invited Remy for dinner. Remy was an old and lonesome man with no wife and no real friends that she knew of. After all, it was the neighbourly thing to do, and it would be interesting to get to know the source of his mysterious bitterness. He probably felt exactly the same way as she did last night but every day of his life. Alice couldn't imagine anyone enjoying that. She believed that those those who said they were happy alone were simply putting up a front because being pathetic is worse than being lonely. The idea of the dinner occupied her whole day, she went to the market and bought all the necessary ingredients to make a fabulous meal for this strange old man.

Around 8pm, Remy arrived with half-empty bottle of gin and three canned sodas.

‘Well, you’ve certainly done something to the place,’ he said as he toured the living room. Alice felt shaky, almost nauseous. ‘So, what’s for dinner Cinderella?’

‘Why are you calling me Cinderella?’

‘Don’t you feel a bit like a Cinderella, keeping the house alone, while everyone is enjoying the extravagant parties in Paris?’

‘I don’t know that anyone is having parties. And there’s no prince or shoes... I mean, I don’t get the joke, honestly.’

‘What a great host, already dismissing my jokes! Has no one ever taught you to laugh politely?’

‘I guess not...’

‘Alright, let’s move on, what’s for dinner *Alice*? I didn’t know you were old enough to cook.’

‘We’re having some fish, and spinach, with my particular sauce, then some dessert. I hope you like sea bass?’

‘Oh dear, I dread it. What a shame.’

‘Really? I can make something else.’

‘No no don’t worry, I’ll survive. Thanks.’

She stared at him for a moment. He made himself comfortable on the velvet blue armchair by the fireplace. He was short, and half bald with his remaining hair lying around like strips of white feathers. His face was particularly pale, almost yellow, and very round, like his little belly, and his teeth seemed to have been sawed in half.

‘Would you like some wine? Here are some tapenades I made,’ she came by and sat on the sofa beside him.

‘So, what are you doing here all by yourself?’

‘My father thought it was best for me to take some time to think of my future.’

‘Your future? Why does that matter?’

‘I’ve just finished university this year and I haven’t really made any plans for myself. I guess they don’t want me moving back to the house.’

‘Oh, that’s right, you were in Scotland. My mother was Scottish you know.’

‘I didn’t know that. Have you been to Edinburgh?’

‘I spent some time there as a young man.’

‘What were you doing there?’

‘I took my mother’s furniture and brought it to America to sell it.’

He had already finished his glass and was pouring himself another one. She listened to him go on. Remy had a reputation for being the king of the island because he knew absolutely every details of everybody’s business. It was enough ammunition to ruin anybody’s life. Alice, just like her mother, flew to gossip like a moth does towards a flashlight.

‘How come you didn’t stay there?’

‘I’ve done many things in my life, dear.’

‘In what way?’ Alice began to direct him towards the table, serving the food as he spoke. Remy recounted his life of debauchery as a supposedly successful actor, then writer (though Alice had never seen a published book around), his multiple affairs in multiple countries, his encounters with international stars and royalty. When his mother — a bastard but also sole heiress of a dying line of British nobility — died, Remy opened an antique store in New York to sell all of her heirlooms. But New York was too tiring for this wise soul who needed a place to write and relax, so he came back to his roots and now enjoys his daily visits at the *Vraie Croix*, his lieu of inspiration.

‘And you never got married or fell in love?’

‘Love is a strange mechanism I’m unfamiliar with.’

‘What do you mean?’ Alice laughed at his overly serious stare. She was all too familiar with the silliness of cynics and was not particularly convinced by his long enumeration of exploits.

‘Perhaps I fell in love in my life, but if I did I was never sure of it, and women seemed to hate me. Except for one, but she’s gone now.’

‘Do you regret that?’

‘If you live with regrets, you should just die’, he answered, gulping down his entire glass of gin and tonic. Then he stood up and went to the fridge to serve himself another one. ‘Would you care for a drink? This wine is abominable.’

Alice turned to look at him standing there in the kitchen like a ghoul. She simply nodded, convinced that alcohol had taken its toll on wisdom.

‘What do you count on doing, then? After this great stay in solitude?’ , he went on.

‘I’m not sure...’

‘Better that way, better to get life to guide you.’

‘But that’s just it. I feel like life does guide me, and I never have any choice. In the beginning it was comforting because I was young and looking for a path to follow. But, I mean, I am still young now, and still it seems like every thing that happens, well, I knew it would happen, just like going to Brittany for the summer like I do every year, and nothing ever changes, and I never really make any decisions. It’s so damn repetitive, and there’s no way of being free unless you really go off the rails, but I’m not the kind to go off the rails. I don’t like to cause any trouble.’

‘Well to be free you need to accept that you’ll hurt some people, that’s just how it is.’

‘What I’m saying is that even if I tried to be free, I wouldn’t be. It’s like there’s something or someone guiding each one of my actions. Then, I guess, once you trust the way, it’s not so scary. But still!’ Alice was practically speaking to herself.

‘It’s such a strange obsession you women have of being free. It’s always women that I hear going on about this boring subject. What does it matter anyway? You don’t need to decide anything, just have a couple of kids and there you go, there’s an easy career path for you.’

Alice stared at him incredulously. Noticing this, the old man began to laugh dryly, as if his mouth were an old attic blowing dust as the door opens. She stood up, took the plates away and went to the

kitchen. He had left a mushed up mess on his plate and hadn't eaten anything; she would have to throw it all away. As she dropped the plates in the sink, an utter sense of disgust came over her. She reluctantly got the tiramisu she had specially made for him out of the fridge, and served it on the plates like a child forced to apologise for the wrong crime.

'I'm not a misogynist, I love women,' he shouted so she could hear from the kitchen.

Alice walked in with the dessert, wearing the perfect smile she had knitted throughout her years of socialising.

'Why don't you go visit some places, have you been to the Mont St Michel?', the old man stuttered, looking more and more like a victim of jaundice.

'Yes, of course, but a long time ago when I was a kid.'

'It's a place people go to find answers. You might be able to get an answer there yourself.'

'An answer to what?'

'To your mysterious problem on freedom, to know what you'd like to make of yourself in this life, to know how to stop listening to your daddy. Isn't that the problem?'

'My father just gives me advice, I can chose to take it or not.'

'Sure, sure. He knows best,' he sniggered.

'What do you have against him? You can tell me, even though he's my father, I don't mind.'

'Against him? Dear! Keep your questions to yourself, I haven't drunk enough. Here have some gin.'

She poured herself a glass.

'So, what, you're religious? You believe God will speak to me at Mont Saint Michel?', she went on.

'No, I'm a disheartened atheist. Can't you tell?'

'Yes, I guess there isn't much place left for God with an ego like yours.' Alice was getting drunk, and she immediately felt ashamed of her snarky comment. She wasn't used to being so sarcastic but the man was inspiring something dark within her.

'Well done, girl.'

Then came a great silence. She didn't know what to say or what to think anymore and the old man's presence was weighing on her. She had hoped to receive some ancient wisdom from him, but instead she found herself more lost and uncomfortable. If she learned something, it was that old people could be as foolish and she was. Alice wished he would leave, it was already late and he hadn't touched the dessert. But despite the increasingly heavy burden of silence, the old man seemed calm, almost happy. He kept sipping on his gin in slow but short recurrent gulps, looking around the house as if mimicking the inner state of dizziness that was developing in his mind. Alice looked around too, trying to figure out if Remy was hallucinating or simply gesticulating like a drunk. She then got up to pick up the plates but he interrupted her:

'So, what stories do you really know about this place?' She sat back down and he went on, 'you know about the ghosts of Brittany, the banshees and the sort?'

'Sure, kid's stories...'

'Well, you know, adults are just kids with more layers.'

'What do you mean?'

'Kids' stories are worth more than you think.'

'You know, I'm going to be living here alone for the next month, that's hard enough, I don't need an extra set of paranormal things to worry about, if you don't mind.'

'Oh, yes, yes of course. No need for that.'

Silence again. This time heavier, like a cloud about to burst with rain. Alice never knew how to get someone to leave, she never wanted anyone to leave before.

'When I was a child, —

'Would you like to go to the sitting room?', she attempted to ask politely.

'Boh! Don't cut me off, girl! I'm telling you something important,' Alice was doomed. 'When I was a child, my grandmother used to have these great parties. That's what she was known for. She would let her guests do whatever they wanted in the confines of her home. My parents were always away and left me and my brother with her all summer. One night,' as he spoke, Alice grew more

impatient. She couldn't listen to his croaky voice anymore, it was becoming unbearable. Remy went on, his head drooping slightly, his tiny teeth clacking, 'then one night, my brother and I went out in the garden at night and a woman from the party who was smoking outside noticed us running around and told us to come near. So we did. She was beautiful, dressed all in white, with a headpiece made of feathers. She was wiping her tears away as we arrived. Then she bent down and looked at us in the eyes and said,

'You boys be careful and be kind. We don't have it easy. Be kind and don't go around being bastards.' We ran off into the garden and when we turned around she wasn't —"

'Don't you think you've had enough to drink now? I'm tired.'

'Right. Right. Apologies, I'll go my way. Have a good night,' he began stumbling up, but abruptly fell back down into the chair.

'You and your rigid catholic families,' he began, 'you silly little bourgeois, you don't see the filth hidden in your lives. You don't notice the torture.'

'What are you talking about? You're just like me, except worse because you're... you're ugly.'

Alice answered, laughing.

'No, I'll tell you what you don't know.'

'I don't want to know, please, I'm tired.'

He grabbed the neglected bottle of wine and poured the remains in his glass of gin.

'Well, you asked me before, to tell you all the little secrets on this island, didn't you?'

'Sure. Fine, yes, I am intrigued.' Alice took his plate with the untouched dessert and began eating, curious and annoyed.

'You don't know your father's family well, do you?'

'No, my grandparents died when I was too young and my cousins don't live in France.'

'But do you know why you never see them?'

'I know my grandparents were neglectful and my father doesn't like hypocrisy.'

Remy begins to laugh heartily, coughing and wheezing.

‘What is it?’

‘Well, my dear girl, how to put it...’

‘What?’

‘Your father had a girlfriend here, for a long time. Every weekend and every summer he would spend his time with her. You didn’t notice because you were too young and he was sly and knew how to divide his time. We spoke a lot when we negotiated the sale of this house, back when you were a child. He never gave me much information, but I understood quickly what it was all about. The girl, Elise, lived here on the island and everyone knew she was in love with him. They had been together for nearly 10 years, and she could never move on to someone else. She was quite young too, around your age when they first met. He swooned her instantly and she was innocent and somehow believed in the purity of their love, or something stupid like that. Finally, after a few years, when you were still a kid, she got pregnant and at some point he found out. She was very set on having the baby, at least that’s the conclusion I came to, because I found her dead on the road behind my house, hit by a car. Hit and run they said, but your father killed her. And I was even in custody under suspicion for six months because that bastard did it on my property. I know because I saw him meticulously clean the blood off his car at night, like everything was perfectly planned. He preferred to kill a woman bearing his child, then to face scandal.’ Remy had tears in his eyes. It was the first time Alice saw an old man cry and it made the whole scene even more despicable. She just stared at him, speechless. His face was contorted into thick lines, swerving around uncontrollably. His eyes began to move and his mouth was distorted by some buzzing sound, and his hair was evaporating into space. His skin grew even paler, white like the walls which seemed to come out and grab him from behind. Alice stared, and she noticed herself falling backwards even though she was sitting down.

Then, suddenly, the old man stood up, grabbed the empty bottle of gin and walked out of the dining area, with Alice watching him, tetanized.

‘Right, well I’m on my way now. Cheerio!’

The door slammed and Alice fell to the ground as if all of the strength holding her up left with Remy.

A day had passed and solitude was weighing on the girl who had never been alone. Alice had no idea what to do with herself. The question of truth had short-circuited her mind. Imagine, a murderer, so cold-hearted, so brutal, so calculating... It could be him... there was something within her that could believe it. But then, surely a form of guilt would transpire on the lines of his face, something would give it away. And yet there was nothing, neither in his attitude, in his manner of speech, nor in the adoration for his family that made him look like a cold-blooded killer. Every word he had uttered, she was convinced, was the result of a true concern in regard to his children. Alice knew that, no matter what, his was the advice she could listen to. He always knew the right thing to do, just like bringing her here to Brittany. He was a good man, a fervent Catholic. What was there more to say? Remy was an evil bastard who came to her home to destabilise her. But still, what if what he was saying was true? She never really knew anything about him, nor her family, and it is true that he was hardly ever around whether it was on the weekends or throughout the week. And her mother was a nervous wreck most probably suffering from neglect and realistically, her father was cold and was insulting and controlling. As she looked back into her memories, flashing all the details she had recorded, her childhood was hardly even tinted by a simple ‘I love you’ and was rather marked by the severe verbal and physical blows. Any happiness she had ever felt as away from her home, far off with her friends. Any security she had ever experienced was truthfully when she was studying an ocean away, forging her own life and rules. What would she do if her father really was a murderous, adulterous, lying bastard? Stuck in a frozen state of mental convulsion, Alice’s spirit became increasingly frail. Before her, the world was growing thinner and

senseless, like an excessively slick crystal glass. As she looked around her flowery room, she felt the walls beginning to melt. The dusty lamp hanging above her head seemed to move and the shutters of the windows drifted slowly, as if carried by a smooth breeze.

It was a bright day outside, morning had just passed to noon, and Alice was still immobilised in her bed. Her room had become an echo chamber, resonating all of the different conclusions that came out of Remy's statement. If her father had, until now, always given her the soundest advice and had guided her towards a good path, he was to be trustworthy. Her whole life depended on him; he was the great provider. But then it was also possible that everything she ever knew or felt was a tragic lie. She felt herself fluctuate between faith and fear, just like she had her whole life, except this time was the first after she had convinced herself that last time was the last. Worse, the world around her was becoming as unstable as her mind, moving and drifting right and left. The nausea that had penetrated last night became overbearing. She was stuck in this stormy ship and she had forgotten how to swim.

Then, the phone rang. But she was too far to get to it, too far in her swerving madness and couldn't manage to get up. But the act of attempting to bring her foot down to the floor, at first highly chaotic, helped her fix onto a point and sit up straight. She looked around and noticed slowly the waves calm down. Finally, she got the courage to stand up. With all this strength having piled up to get her out of bed, Alice was suddenly filled with highly concentrated vitality that she wouldn't allow to go to waste. She ran down the stairs, still in her pyjamas, to one of the cellars, and grabbed the first hard object she could find. Then she put the big rubber boots that always stood in the back entrance, for rainy days, and ran out of the house into the field. The sun was shining brightly and portending the coming of summer. Alice ignored disgusting the smelly insides of the boots she was wearing, which were twice the size of her foot. She ran clumsily and ended up in front of Remy's stone house. She knocked on the thick green door, but to no avail. Sometimes, you just need to get it done. Sometimes, she repeated, you just need to go through with it and not think, for once.

Surprisingly, and surprised, Remy finally opened the door. He was wearing a heavy burgundy robe that definitely hasn't been washed since he came back from Columbia. He first saw the little creature, so thin with the boots going up to her thighs, in her mini pyjama shorts and stained tank-top glaring at him, rabid, and then focused on the two big black eyes of a shotgun, feverishly waiting to do its duty.

'Well, well, well... What is this? Has madame Alice spent too much time with the Mad Hatter?'

Alice opened her mouth to speak, but too many options made her unable to choose what to answer.

'I'll be honest with you, truly, I would love to see you try. Do you know how to use it?'

She did know. She even had used it, not so long ago, with some friends. She could do it.

But Remy went on: 'Are you upset because of what I told you last night? You don't have to be. It was just a farce.'

'Really?', the black eyes slowly moved towards the ground.

'If that's what you prefer to think.' And they dashed straight back up, mimicking Alice's angry green eyes. 'It's your father you should kill, not me. If you want to avenge the girl, I mean.'

'My life isn't a game.'

'Sure it is! *Life's but a walking shadow... et cetera, et cetera.*'

'Focus because I'll give you three minutes, before I kill you.' She said, now very convinced.

'Why the wait? Get it over with! You wouldn't have been the first one to try...'

Alice cocks the gun. It was hard and crusty. She slowly comes closer and brings it straight to Remy's uncovered chest. Something within her was switched on by rage, and suddenly he was looking more and more like the fish she had gutted just the day before. Just stinky guts for the garbage, nothing more. His white body, fresh with a coat of greasy morning dew, ready to be chopped and cooked. She then looks down at his yellow toenails, like mushrooms growing out of a tree trunk, and is overcome with nausea. Remy closes his eyes and take a deep breath; he believes in the mastery of impulses, he knows what it can do. At that same instant, Alice directs her stare from the cadaver-like toes to Remy's face, seemingly calm, breathing. Do it, do it, why not? Do it!

Yet the wave of strength has passed its course. Alice very suddenly falls to the ground and with her the shotgun that detonates. Howling and blood all over. The man falls like a pin. Red splatters the ground, fully and vertically. Fragments of ligaments, bones, tones, thrown up to the ceiling.

Judged as an accident, approved by Remy who claimed she had simply come for advice on its up keeping, the incident had no great judicial impact on Alice's life or potential career. However, she had sentenced herself to months of nursing. 'Let him rot,' her father had said, but she insisted, for once, that she should do a good deed to make up for her being so impressionable. So there she was, pushing the old man languidly around in his wheel chair, waiting for his flesh to grow back, and for her guilt to heal.

Despite the stench, the undiscovered bugs, the dust and dread present in Remy's house, Alice convinced herself that if she suffered as he did, she could undo what rage, nevertheless justified, had provoked in her. Alice had decided to believe the truth; because through his actions and through his words, she began to weave the official verdict that her father would have been capable of doing it. And that conjecture was enough to prove Remy right. If, knowing him, he was capable of it, then Alice was convinced her father was a murderer, so she chose to stay with Remy, at least for now.

'How am I going to go around prancing around in the prairie, now?' Remy said, when she admitted, crying in torrents, that she had been misguided all along, that everything she believed was false, that there was no true love in her home, that she was truly all alone and that there was no one to trust, ever. What could Remy say? He had already said enough.

One purple afternoon, after Remy had dozed off, Alice walked towards her house to pick up some book to make the lonely time pass by. Nearing the garden, she noticed a silhouette waiting in

front of the back door, knocking. Alice quickened her haste and caught up with a young woman, not much older than her, with dark black hair.

She was wearing a big shiny smile and stared at Alice for a few moments before she spoke:

‘Hi, I’m Elise. I work in town and my aunt told me you were in the house alone. I was wondering if you’d like to spend some time together?’

A miracle. And then...

‘Did you say Elise?’

‘Yes, I know your father, he helped me get a job at the real estate office. But I’ve never met your family properly.’

A huge wave crashes by. Alice maintains focus on the woman’s dark eyes. No Alice, faith is about making a decision and not going back. You’ve made that decision. You’ve made it.

‘Yes, sure, come on in,’ she said, mimicking the smile. She opened the door and walked in feebly towards the kitchen. ‘So, how long have you been working at the agency?’ She asked, trying hard to be normal.

No answer. Alice turns around. There is no one around. Somehow, it seems, Alice’s friends all disappear.