

Alice

Tom stood motionless in front of the lectern his hands gripping it tightly either side of the papers that lay on it, the contents of which he had to deliver to the sea of sombre faces that were looking at him expectantly waiting for his oratory to begin. His amiable and confident manner, sense of good humour and fun had always made him a popular choice of host and public speaker, a role he always thoroughly enjoyed as did his audiences. But today was different, today he had to carry out one last request for Alice his dearest friend ever and read the eulogy at her funeral. He looked again at the papers in front of him and swallowed hard to try and remove the lump of concrete that had lodged itself in the back of his throat but it refused to disappear, he could delay no longer and from somewhere he had to find the courage to speak. Staring at the neat round handwriting that he recognised so well as Alice's he couldn't believe how a cheeky little smile managed to escape, and he knew that Alice was there with him. The last few days had seen him practise the next few minutes a thousand times over, but now he had to do it for real, no restarts when he couldn't get past the tears or that damned immovable piece of concrete that seemed now to have increased in size making the ability to swallow totally impossible.

"Hello" he said shakily and decided first to introduce himself for there were many in attendance that would have no idea who he was. "I'm Tom" he said, "Alice was my closest and dearest friend for many years, and some considerable time ago she told me that she had written her own final farewell, and assuming that I would still be here to do so, made me promise to read it on her behalf. Those of you who knew Alice would know that to refuse this request was not an option, and my fears of trepidation at such a task were squashed without a second thought, so I will do my best." Clearing his throat yet again he took another deep breath and looked down at the words that were waiting to be read.

"First of all," Alice had written, "I would like to thank anyone who has spared the time to come here today, because I know you all have busy lives with families, careers, and a thousand and one better things to do." Tom paused and looked up, when Alice had written this she had said to him "I don't expect there will be many turn up when my time comes, after all I have no family, but there may be a few friends who will spare the time." She had never ever realised the impact she had made on anyone's life she touched, and would have been amazed thought Tom to see the little country church full to bursting, with people standing pressed against the walls to make more space, and even more spilling out into the churchyard all of whom had come to pay their personal tribute to Alice.

Tom recommenced, and it seemed to be getting easier, even now Alice was there for him and somehow giving him the inner strength, he needed. "I was born on 24th December," he read, "And for those of you obsessed with the importance of age the year was 1935. Myself I have always thought of birthdays as just God's way of having some sort of stock control system in place, so that He could keep a check on our time here in this life before he asked us to join Him in the next part of what I believe to be a wonderful journey." Tom paused and looked up to see knowing smiles looking back at him from the faces below. Alice could never tolerate people who formed their whole opinion of others based on their age. She used to refer to them as narrow-minded fools who had no idea of how to grasp the joy of life and enjoy all it

had to offer to the full. It was people that were the important key to it all, people of all ages, walks of life, colour, creed, or religion shouldn't matter, talk to them all, listen to them laugh with them, cry with them, share their hopes, dreams, fears and sorrows, and above all be yourself. "Don't let age lock you into a narrow-minded cell," she would say. The congregation gathered proved the point only too well, the young, middle aged, and old were all here today for her; she had never been any age to any of them at all, she had just simply been Alice.

Tom read on, "I had loving parents, who provided the best upbringing they could, I was an only child, and desperately wanted brothers and sisters but it wasn't to be. My dear Father was my best friend, my Mother was my best critic always spurring me on to do better, and my Grandma my true fairy godmother, who always managed to put things in perspective for me when all else failed. My school days were completely insignificant and I disliked them intensely, I was shy, lacking in confidence, and it was with great joy when I walked out of the school gates for the final time, but my hopes that stepping into the outside world would suddenly change things for me were soon dashed. It did not take long to realise that unless I found some sort of self belief and confidence in myself the rest of my life would be spent in fear and dread of just about everything. And to prove the point my first job as a junior in the accounts department of Harlow and Johnson a prestigious ladies fashion store, found me in a more servile set of circumstances than school had ever been! How I hated that job, and how I feared Beryl, my supervisor who was nothing less than a Rotweiler in a grey suit. Her neatly waved hair sat on her head like a helmet, never moving even on the windiest of days, and a set of teeth that any racehorse would be proud of were made to look even more fearsome because they were set in a frame of bright red lipstick, which was the only make up that she wore. In fact, she left such an impression on me that I have always lived in total terror of absolutely anyone called Beryl!"

Over the years Alice had spoken to many a young person about these times and her own inadequacies when she was young. She often found a friend's son or daughter on her doorstep as they struggled to cope with all the same problems that growing up brings because they found it so very easy to talk to her rather than their parents. But that was Alice, and maturity had enabled her to talk about most things not only with compassion and understanding but also with great humour, and it was the humour that was her inexplicable gift in being able to talk to people especially the young and enable them to see the sense in their parents wishes, who after all had nothing more than their best interests at heart.

These chats would usually end with a certain amount of laughter, and she would always say that despite her great sadness at the loss of her father she was always helped in the knowledge that she had without doubt inherited his joy of life and his wonderful humour. "Just as well" she would say, "After all he had no money to leave, but he also left me his ears, nose, and dreadful feet, none of which I have ever forgiven him for! But the humour, well, that has without doubt been a priceless gift".

Drawing on her own experiences she would talk about typical disagreements with her mother over boyfriends, clothes, coming home in the early hours despite being told not to, and how she often walked home late at night from a party arm in arm with her father who had been despatched into the streets to find out where "his!" daughter was.

“Dad had a different approach,” she would say. “He would reason with me, and try to make me see that underlying all of this was just the pure and simple love and concern that any parent feels; it was just that he was so much better at putting me in my place, and when he decided that at the tender age of eighteen I should be rechristened “Know All”, as much as I tried to be indignant, I couldn’t hold out against his twinkling eyes and wise grin, as he cleverly reduced my over inflated ego back to its correct size.” Looking up, Tom paused again and waited for the knowing smiles and quiet chuckles to die down.

The loss of her mother had left her alone with no other family, and it was that which had prompted her to take up writing. She found a great deal of solace for her inner thoughts and feelings by doing so and felt there must be many others in similar situations with no one to talk to. So, starting with one or two little stories that got published in local free magazines and radio, and drawing upon her own circumstances for a story line she wrote about nearly everything that had happened to her - the ups the downs, the good times, the bad times, the sad times. She talked of her own personal philosophy which was always to accept that life was a compromise and you should always make the best and enjoy to the full what you have; it was too short to waste time on things that you couldn’t have, or might have been. “Grasp the moment that you have here and now,” she would say, “Don’t waste it, you may not get a second chance.” From the stories came best-selling books always fictional but packed with reality, and she became famous worldwide, and a much read and respected author by people in all walks of life.

Alice had never had children of her own, “Life just didn’t head me in that direction,” she would say, and there had been many over the years who she was sure could not understand that she felt no great loss or disappointment because of this. “You must understand that I have been fortunate enough to have a wonderful life and meet and talk to thousands of people young and old over the years, and if just by lending an ear sometimes has helped someone, then I haven’t failed them. The opportunity to travel and achieve what I have would never have been possible with a family of my own at my heels. So, I took the deck of cards fate offered me and dealt them the best way I could, and gathered an enormous adopted family of my own on the way, and I could never express to you all what your kindness and love has meant to me. My father always used to say to when I complained about coming from such a small family and being an only child that I shouldn’t worry about it, because true and loyal friends you could choose, but family you were quite often stuck with!”

Finally Tom found himself looking down at the last sheet of paper, the blank space under the last paragraph confirming that he had reached the end, and he secretly heaved a sigh of relief that he had managed to do this for Alice without a hitch. There was silence as he looked up, and at that very moment a shaft of bright light came through the pretty little stained glass window and a laser beam of sun shone on the beautiful sheath of red roses that sat on top of Alice’s little coffin, it was almost as if she was saying “Thank you Tom, well done”, and quietly he returned to his seat.

It only now remained for the vicar to conclude the proceedings in the usual manner. Tom watched in silence as the church doors opened, and two natural lines of people formed to slowly follow Alice on the last part of her journey. But was it? As they walked outside the two lines naturally spread out, and as Tom looked on he likened it to the one of those gardening programmes where clever photography allows us to

watch a small new flower bud burst majestically into full bloom, and as he looked around he suddenly felt that this was not Alice's final journey at all. Just as the flower bud opens its petals, she had unselfishly opened her heart to so many of these people here today at some time or another. This was not the end, this was only the beginning of Alice's legacy, they would all leave today with a little bit of Alice which would stay with them forever, and many of them would pass it on to their children and their children's children without even realising it. Alice was just like the flower in full bloom, and they were the pollinating bees making ready to move on and perpetuate life. No, Alice was not gone, she was everywhere, and she had left a little piece of herself in all of them, a story, love, compassion, kindness, and loyal friendship, but most of all a smile.