The World and Alice

by

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1.

She didn't belong in the world. Alice knew this as a fact by the time she reached middle age, but she had always felt it for as long as she could remember. Her being lacked some vital element, as though she were a shadow enjoying physical extension that could be touched and weighed and measured and yet did not add up to a solid body boasting independent existence. Others might see her, but few registered her presence. She thought of her lack as one not of soul, but of heft. Of gravity. Of placed-ness. Her self, simply, possessed no proper place in the world.

She belonged somewhere else. Or perhaps nowhere, nowhere at all. And so she thought of herself as the world's mistake. A century earlier, she believed, the mistake could not have been made.

In its use of its technologies, the world, she considered, had a lot to answer for.

2.

Alice realized early that most people took their belonging in the world for granted. Perhaps the world did not always take as much notice of them as they'd like, but it recognized the ontological rightness of their presence and never prompted so much as a fleeting doubt about *that*. A few people, though, exerted so much heft that they were nearly worlds in themselves, immense wells of gravity around which others orbited. Alice's grandmother, who cared for her from the time of her emergence from an incubator until she started kindergarten, seemed to Alice as much a place in the world as a person. A lap, after all, was a place, though it only existed in special conditions subject to swift and sudden change; and so, surely, the whole of a person could be a place, too.

Her grandmother would open a pint jar of beets she had pickled months before, and she and Alice would eat the smooth shiny flesh with homemade bread thickly

buttered for lunch. They would sit at the kitchen table, spearing the slices of beet with their forks, and the energy of a powerful pull would vibrate through Alice's being, as though the fragile threads of her insubstantial self had been drawn into her grandmother's gravitational field, exerting a force nearly strong enough to keep her from drifting thinly away into air, a force that promised to ground her in love and blood and earth. Feeling in that moment as though she belonged, she would admire the way the beets shone like jewels and wonder how each slice could be so thrillingly smooth even as it revealed a pattern that reminded her of a tree trunk that had been cut close to the ground, like the rough-textured stump beside the garage, on which she often laid red, gold, and orange leaves and the glossy horse chestnuts the squirrels would steal the minute she turned her back. Alice observed that her grandmother saw this and all other connections and resemblances; and she understood that her grandmother encompassed the totality of her world. And for all the time that world included only the two of them, Alice inhaled happiness with every breath and knew that the world was beautiful, however tenuous her place in it might be.

When Alice was thirty-four she decided that her grandmother had given her child's self heft not through noticing her and taking her seriously (which she did), but simply because someone who was in and of herself a place could create the illusion of belonging for anyone her field of gravity touched. She wondered how many people who didn't belong in the world soothed their suspicions that they didn't by finding people who are places and establishing orbits around them.

Someone, she thought, should do a study.

3.

Every family has its canon of stories, and in Alice's family, the story of her premature birth on the very border of viability ranked. Every time the story was told, her mother or father or uncle or aunt would say, "We were afraid we were going to lose you, Alice. We didn't know if you would make it. The doctor said you wouldn't." At this point in the story's narration, when she was young, Alice would hide her head in her

grandmother's lap, aware of everyone staring at her. And then she would think, *They know I don't belong.* Once she overheard her Aunt Nola commenting to her grandfather on Alice's shocking skinniness and abnormal bashfulness. "I bet it has something to do with her being so premature. She was always too thin. All those weeks in that incubator, Pa, and her hardly weighing so much as a pound. It's marked her, anybody can see that. It don't matter how much potato soup Ma gets her to eat, everything just runs through her. She'll always be a skinny runt with arms and legs like toothpicks."

Nola had been eleven when Alice was born, and around the time Alice started kindergarten she'd been an Elvis Presley fan, always talking on the square black bakelite telephone and drinking Pepsi-Cola, which riddled her teeth with cavities. She wore bobby socks and loafers until she graduated from high school and orange lipstick and blue suede pumps with three-inch heels when she went to work for the phone company. Carefully closing and locking the bathroom door, Alice would examine and handle her aunt's special paraphernalia—eyelash curlers, auburn eyebrow pencils, and tweezers. Unlike her aunt's lipstick and compact, which she carried in her purse and often left out in open sight, these were kept hidden in a drawer, secret implements too private to be spoken of. And yet everyone in the family knew about Alice's spastic colon and what the doctor had said after she'd endured all the tests he'd ordered. Her aunt and others explained all that they didn't understand about her as something to do with her colon. Every time she heard them talking about it, she'd have to double over because her colon would start spazzing and twisting around in her belly like a snake tying itself up in knots.

She carried Nola's comment around with her, tucked away in one of the many mental pockets she used to reserve items needing thorough examination and handling. Eventually it provided her with the key to theorizing her out-of-placeness. In its essence, her theory was simple. She had not been *meant* to be born, to survive, to live in this world. There had been a mistake somewhere. She articulated it, of course, in the passive voice, to avoid implicating God. For although she attended church every Sunday and a parochial school with religious lessons every weekday, she could not manage to speak the thought, even to herself, that God had not intended her to be born, much less the idea that

medical technology had thwarted God's intention. Her teachers did their best to instruct her that God knew who she was and everything about her, but Alice, with all her lack of heft, found the idea preposterous. From about the age of eight she had grasped that "God's Will" signified anything and everything that happened or, occasionally, a special interpretation of reality. Her teachers talked often about how God's Will determined everything that ever happened to sparrows. Once she raised her hand and said "Mrs. Covington, does that go for ants and flies and worms, too? Does God care for them, also?" Mrs. Covington's mouth twitched into a sickly rictus of a smile. "God cares for *all* his creatures, Alice." "And rattlesnakes? And mosquitos? And crocodiles? What about rabid dogs? And what about Cain? If God cared about Cain, why did he look down on his fruits and vegetables and praise Abel's stinky old dead animals—"

But Mrs. Covington had had enough. She told Alice that asking those kinds of questions came very close to mocking God and assigned her five extra Bible verses to learn by heart. Alice obediently memorized the verses; but Mrs. Covington's disapproval imbued with special clarity her understanding that God was capricious and arbitrary, which was why His Will generally meant very unpleasant things for everybody all around. So although she would not put it past God to have Willed her not to be born, for as long as she believed in God (i.e., until about the age of seventeen) she believed that in fact he had changed His Mind about bringing her into existence, probably at the last second, and had then forgotten to alter His Plan so as to make the change fit into the Greater Scheme of Things. He might notice how every sparrow in the world fared, but she felt virtually certain she had slipped under His radar.

Alice's grandfather might declare he was mad at God after her grandmother died, but Alice understood that God's willing a death had to be a different kind of exercise of will than letting someone slip into the world who shouldn't have. And yet the idea of a forgetful God, who knew what every sparrow, worm, and fly was doing, made no sense to her. In her very first religion class in the first grade they'd had to memorize the attributes of God, one of which was omniscience. Every year Alice tested her new

teacher. "Does God ever make mistakes?" The answer, always the same, got frostier and frostier as Alice rose through the grades.

By seventh grade, she knew better than to ask.

4.

When her grandmother died, Alice found herself alone and bereft of a massy body to orbit, weighing barely enough to sustain consciousness of, much less presence in, the world. She often drifted away, her heft so tenuous that between one heart beat and the next she slipped briefly out of the world to a place that held, to her untutored perception, only images, a jumble subject to shifting as swiftly and unpredictably as the tiles in her cardboard and plastic kaleidoscope.

Her grandmother lingered in her dreams for months. Repeatedly Alice wakened into happiness that shattered in the inevitable moment of remembering, taunting her with a loss she could explain to no one, teaching her that her dreams were false. Her grandmother had known she didn't belong, had noticed and hadn't had to lie about it. To everyone else, she was just nervous. High-strung. Overly sensitive. In need of lightening up: everyone agreed.

On Sunday afternoons at the cemetery, Alice helped her grandfather snip the soft velvety grass and tend the brave, bright petunias and geraniums surrounding the gravestone that lay flush to the earth. The stone never seemed right to her; its pink and gray surface held such a polish that it resembled a mirror on which had been stamped her grandmother's name and dates in unsuitably ornate characters, not a signifier either of loss or of who the woman buried there had been. Still, other than a few photographs and keepsakes, it was all that remained of her.

Alice needed to attend the grave alone, to visit without the distraction of others' presence and without the pressure of having always to give way to someone else's grief for a woman so many had loved. So Alice became devious. She learned how to fool the adults surveilling her whereabouts, which buses to take, and how to cross the four-lane

highway; and she acquired an indifference to walking or bicycling several miles in one day, which previously had been beyond her.

Although the stone radiated cold even when the sun beat down on it, Alice needed to lay her head on it, needed to thrust her fingers into the grass, right into the ground. Being in touch with the grave, she sensed, kept her from drifting out of the world into the other place that so often beckoned to her, where nothing had heft, where everything constantly moved and collided in a chaos devoid of meaning. She hoped that making the physical link would bring her into contact with some small trace of her grandmother remaining in the world, which she thought might be possible simply because her grandmother had had more heft than anyone she had ever known.

On her grandmother's birthday almost a year and a half after her death, Alice lay, as she often did, with her head on the stone and her fingers dug into the sod. The rays of the sun soaked into the side of her face, dazzling her with a red brilliance that warmed and penetrated the closed, thin lids of her eyes. She visualized a yellow sheet cake decorated with sugary white icing, festooned with small pink roses and sixty-five candles, and remembered how because her grandmother had had asthma, she had always needed Alice to help blow out her candles. "Happy birthday to you," she sang softly. "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Grandma, happy birthday to you." But though she had her eyes closed, pretending, Alice knew there was no birthday cake, no candles, no birthday at all, even though it was May 1. Her heart ached. She sighed, and her sigh turned into a sob. "If only I could be with you always," she said. "I hate it here without you. Hate it hate it hate it." Her eyes streamed. "I'm tired of being here by myself, Gramma. I want to go home with you. Please. Let me come to you. You know I don't belong here."

"Alice?"

That voice! Alice squeezed her eyes more tightly shut..

"Alice, I want you to listen to me."

Alice grew aware of the pulse of blood pumping through her veins—in her wrists, in her throat, in her belly, in her temples. The sound of it thudded in her ears like

a hammer that knew nothing about stopping. She thought that if she opened her eyes her vision would be swimming in blood.

"Alice? That is you, isn't it?"

Alice opened her eyes and sat up. The sun blinded her. She held her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes. "Gramma?" A woman stood nearby. She had gray hair and wrinkles in her face, and she had the right voice; but she was wearing pants, her hair was wrong, and she wasn't as pillowy and large as her grandmother. Death, Alice thought, might change people. Might make them look a little different. Younger, healthier, thinner. And who could it be if not her grandmother? She frowned up at the woman, uncertain.

"Alice, Alice. Who else would be here on May first?" The woman knelt and held open her arms. "Come to me, little Apple. Come give me a hug."

Alice did not hesitate. The only persons who ever called her "Apple" were her grandmother and grandfather. She nestled close, her head tucked into the hollow of the old woman's throat. The arms, the bosom, the lap were not her grandmother's, nor was the old woman's smell. But all of these were good, all surprisingly intimate and familiar. This woman wasn't her grandmother but offered some trace of her. A trace sadly without heft, but better than nothing of her grandmother at all.

Alice the Older held the girl in her arms and laid kisses in the fine, tangled hair that smelled of sun and earth and Prell shampoo. The slightness of Alice the Younger made an ache stir in her belly. *Sentimental old fool. You're indulging in narcissism here, even if you didn't expect to find her in this place, even if you'd forgotten all about this moment.*

She had expected this visit to the town she had grown up in, a place where no one of her blood had lived for so many years now, to kindle old memories and feelings long laid to rest. But nothing looked familiar. Her grandparents' house had been torn down. The house on Wolf Road and two of its neighbors had been replaced by condos. The Lutheran school was gone. And there were no cornfields anywhere. Only the river remained, dirty and muddy as it had always been, its dam the familiar site of her longest-

running recurring dream. It had seemed reasonable to visit the town since her travel had brought her so close, but the only intimate memory left physically standing seemed to be the small, no longer used graveyard surrounded on three sides by used car lots and fast-food franchises.

Though she hadn't remembered the encounter before she had stepped into the graveyard, as soon as she saw that small girl flung down over the grave she recalled first how she used to come here, alone, and then the conversation she had once thought she had had with her dead grandmother. The girl now talked softly into her shoulder, murmuring her longing, her need, her desperate sense of wrongness. Alice the Older closed her eyes and hid from the dazzle; she concentrated on the girl. Alice had never had a child. And this child—she *knew* this child as no mother could. She imagined taking her with her—out of the girl's proper time. But she knew that doing so could not be right. It might possibly create a temporal paradox. And if that happened, how then could she become the person she was now?

Alice reeled under an attack of vertigo. Listening to the little girl, she remembered that she had always thought she didn't belong anywhere, that her very being had been a mistake. The little girl spoke of that. And of premature birth and incubators…

When the sun began to sink in the sky, Alice the Older told the little girl to go back, go back home to Wolf Road. "You have to stay in your world," she said. "But remember, little Apple, remember that there's a reason for that. A reason I can't take you with me. So go back now, go back to your world."

The little girl cried; the little girl resisted. Finally, though, she left, and a cold breeze ruffled the tall, unmown weeds growing carelessly between the gravestones. Alice's pulse beat in her throat. She saw that the place where the girl had been was no longer manicured, that the flowers had vanished. And her grandmother's headstone now lay between two others, all three of them markers of burials Alice had attended at different times of her life. Alice swallowed, as though to rid herself of the heaviness in her chest by ridding her throat of the lump that emotional constraint had put there, and

read the inscription chiseled into the polished pink granite. All around her, the weeds ruffled under the whip of the wind. Alice imagined that one good gust would blow her away, into the other dimension where she had long imagined she really belonged. *They call abandoned towns ghost towns. But what do you call an abandoned graveyard?*

Alice could not remember whether Alice the Younger had gotten in trouble for getting home so late. But she did know that she had never told a soul about the meeting.

5.

Away at college, Alice found friends and fell in love and married. And for a while she believed that her problem had been simply a case of social alienation, of having grown up in an environment too small and parochial to accommodate her differences in personality, perspective, and imagination. Blooming, she convinced herself that the thin stalk of her psyche thrusting up from the world's roots, however tenuously, anchored her in the world's soil, thin and poor as it might be.

When at twenty-four she met Alice aged seven, the hair on the back of her neck stirred with a dread she could only disavow. And just as at seven and ten she had not recognized her older self, so at nineteen she did not recognize the woman of thirty-nine when she faced her in a restroom in New Orleans. But when at thirty-one she met herself at fifty-three, she neither denied nor forgot the encounter. She recognized the fifty-three year old woman because she so strongly resembled her mother. They met on Rialto Beach, on the coast of Washington State. The water glistened like the smoothest, bluest silk, brushed at decorous intervals by soft gushes of white foam. Afterwards, Alice the Younger decided that both of them had been sucked into some other temporality, not that either of them had strayed into the other's proper time.

The older Alice had been walking south, stepping from one large slippery rock to the next, moving toward Hole-in-the-Wall. The younger Alice, who had just passed through the hole, saw the sun full on the other's face. She halted, balanced on the flat top of an algae-slick boulder, and, hand at her throat, stared at her older self. The other stopped, too, and removed the blue-mirrored sunglasses. After a long moment in which

the sound of the surf filled their ears, Alice the Older said, “We’re really going to have to stop meeting like this.”

Later, Alice the Younger realized the cliché was meant to be a joke. In the moment, though, she felt not the slightest tickle of amusement, but instead a powerful sense of déjà vu—and a fear fueled by her understanding that something was terribly, terribly wrong. Déjà vu, of course, though caused by the misfiring of a synapse, gives the mistaken impression that one has dreamed the moment one is experiencing. But while Alice had not dreamed about meeting herself on Rialto Beach, she had in fact dreamed often about the particular dimension in which she now found herself.

The ocean held constant, and the rocks on which they stood, and both Alices. But the sky fractured into disjointed shards, zigging and zagging down into the earth and below the surface of the water, every misshapen fragment glittering with sinister, nauseating beauty. Alice and Alice knew she was nowhere, nowhere at all, her being as evanescent as the shifting shards of the world around her, constantly moving, appearing and disappearing, growing and shrinking, in an unceasing parade of change. Alice the Younger held out her hands to Alice the Older. “Touch me, please touch me. I’m so afraid, so afraid I’m not real. That nothing is real. Is this where we really belong? Not in the world, but here?”

Alice the Older said, “In the chaos that preceded the world, before there was gravity, before the separation of light and dark, before there were particles and waves and the weak force and the strong?” She took Alice the Younger’s hand, and as they looked into one another’s eyes, Alice the Younger wept. She knew then that what she’d suspected as a child had been true, however much her adult self had refused to believe it. A bitter taste filled her mouth.

Alice the Younger said, “It’s no place, you’re saying. It’s nowhere.”

“So we can only go back, Alice, go back to the world.”

And back they went, to the calm and ordered beauty of Hole-in-the-Wall, where the sky arched in an unbroken vault of blue, safe and certain. Alice stared down at her shoes and saw pink and green anemones clinging to the sides of the rocks, living jewels

of wonder, possessing a heft that sang the hymn of belonging. Alice saw how perfect it was and ached, the way one aches for a passionate love irretrievably lost.

6.

Love, Alice's grandmother taught her, was what mattered most; from love came goodness, and from goodness love. Deep down, Alice always believed this, though for most of her adult life she told herself it was bullshit.

Alice's grandmother taught her about love most often when in the presence of food. "Love means forgiving, Apple." Her grandmother held the golden-crusted loaf she'd made on Saturday to her chest and drew the long serrated blade through the bread toward herself. Gramma had learned to cut bread from her grandmother, on the farm long, long ago. Everyone else had to cut the bread on a board, because it was too dangerous to do it the way Gramma did. "I can't stand to watch her *do* that," Alice's mother said once, appealing in vain to Alice's father to get his mother to be more careful in her handling of knives. But that was how Gramma had grown up, and she'd never hurt herself yet.

"Love means forgiving the ones who do wrong to you. Like Jesus did. If your heart is big enough, you can do it, Apple. And you'll be better for it, even if it doesn't look that way at the time." Gramma didn't use a cutting board to slice apples, either. She'd pull the paring knife through the fruit, straight toward her pillowy bosom. And she'd hand a thin, shapely slice to Alice, who'd just have to say, copying her grandfather, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away!" though she knew that wasn't true for her grandmother, who had to go to the doctor's a lot despite the fact that she did eat an apple just about every day. "Everyone needs to be loved," her grandmother said, paring one beautiful slice after another, "but what most people don't understand is that everybody needs to love, too. Loving is as important as being loved. And in some ways is better than being loved." And Alice would think of how passionately she loved her grandmother and nod wisely and say she knew exactly what her grandmother was saying.

Loving her grandmother was her world; there was nothing she wouldn't do to make her grandmother happy.

"If you love well enough, Apple, you'll be good. And if you're good, you'll also be loved." Her grandmother was separating egg whites as she said this, which she had promised Alice she could whip with the electric beater and which the recipe for angel food cake said must be whipped dry. Alice said, "But aren't there people so good that nobody can love them?" "What do you mean, Apple" asked her grandmother. "Who are you talking about?" And Alice said, "You know, Gramma. People like the minister. And Mr. Becker, the seventh-grade teacher who's so strict. And the church elders." But "that's not goodness," Gramma said. "Not the goodness I'm talking about." And slowly, slowly, Alice got the idea that the goodness they talked about in school and in church wasn't the *real* goodness, the goodness of love.

Later, Alice decided that her parents' idea of goodness wasn't the real goodness, either. And as she grew older, none of the goodness held up to her in this place or that measured up to the idea of goodness her grandmother had taught her. Persons of authority almost invariably failed her. And as Alice spent her life looking for her grandmother everywhere in the world, she elided the idea of heft in the world with the idea of the goodness of love—and never once suspected that she had done so until well after her sixtieth birthday.

As had her grandmother, Daniel offered an elision of heft in the world with the goodness of love. Alice only realized this years after she had married him. He never used words like "love" and "goodness." He said, "All anyone can do is look into the other's eyes and hope for the best." But Daniel's idea of *looking into* and *hoping* encompassed a world as solid and holding as a lap. And Alice again found herself grounded in love and blood and earth.

She had been lucky, she eventually understood. Lucky that although she did not belong in the world she had found persons of love and heft to anchor and keep her from flying apart, wild and disjunct, into the place where nothing had sense and love could not live.

7.

After meeting herself at Hole-in-the-Wall, Alice (the Younger) almost told Daniel about the experience. She thought about how her older self had known she would meet her there and had implied that such meetings happened often. And she wondered how her older self knew that the "crazy chaos" where they had met "preceded the world" and was nowhere. Did this mean that in years to come she would find a way to make sense of what she often felt must be a delusion? She had never told Daniel anything about it. Daniel was a physicist. And it would sound like New Age craziness, she'd thought. But might not a physicist make sense of it, at least as much sense of it as her older self seemed to have done?

Only a week after the meeting at Hole-in-the-Wall, Alice dropped again into a long frozen instant of time where past and future penetrated her consciousness of the present. Her fingers were keying numbers into a project's budget file. And in the fraction of an instant lying between one keystroke and the next, she was slung into a moment that seemed to stretch subjectively into hours of time, where multiple moments of herself in the world overlapped and collided—and then slammed back into ordinary life, where her fingers still marched over the numeric keypad without the slightest hesitation, toiling on as if time had not fractured, as if no interruption had come between her and the world.

How often did such fractures strike? She admitted that they happened more often than she remembered. Usually she kept doggedly on with whatever she was doing and either forgot or dismissed such occurrences as momentary mental aberrations. And when it happened while lying in bed, waiting to fall to sleep, it struck her as an aborted drop into a hypnogogic state that should have led to REM sleep but didn't. At one point in her life—before she recognized the chaos as a locus to which she would always be drawn—she assumed that the fractures were the result of her accessing hypnogogic images with unusual frequency, perhaps as a consequence of certain neurons firing by mistake when she was awake instead of en route to REM sleep. Some of the images, though, recurred, coming from seemingly nowhere, striking without reference to anything

but themselves: an enormous plain of dried brown chaff, tundra stretching as far as the eye could see; a length of rusted railroad tracks, in which a sharp, bloody spike thrust out of the rail bed, impaling the jagged shards of gray and purple sky rushing down to meet it; a jumble of boulders that made her think of death every time she saw them—cold, gray, and lifeless, shining and lonely before a thick backdrop of total, endless night. These images she saw often enough that she began to remember them and thus notice the fractures.

Daniel knew she felt she didn't "belong." This he took for a permanent flaw in her psyche, a wound, perhaps, of a difficult childhood. If she were to tell him about meeting Alice the Older at Hole-in-the-Wall, she'd have to tell him also about her experience of fractures. All of these were simply mental events: perhaps with neurological causes, perhaps simply daydreams. What was there, after all, to actually explain? The evidence was subjective, all of it occurring within the precincts of her mind. Physics could have nothing to say about any of it.

8.

Alice returned often to Rialto Beach, hoping each time for another encounter with herself. She had in mind that certain physical places themselves made the encounters possible and that Rialto Beach was one of those places. She reasoned that the encounters always happened in places she happened to visit at two different times and that therefore the places themselves must be instrumental in throwing temporally discrete instances of her self together. Although the crazy chaos was nearly unbearable in the moment, she nevertheless longed to meet her older self again. Her older self, she thought, could help her understand. Her older self could comfort her. Her older self knew even better than Daniel the wound that made her an exile.

But though she got to know Rialto Beach well, she encountered her self there only at fifty-three, on the other side of that same meeting. So Rialto Beach was no magic window. And the meetings, when they occurred, were not often comforting. Being ignored by her nineteen year-old-self in the restroom of Napoleon House made her feel

lonelier than ever—and a little bit angry and resentful, too, because it reminded her of how at nineteen she had allowed herself to believe that she had been wrong to think she had no place in the world, that it had only been a matter of finding the people she belonged with, through whom she would discover the sense of place that had been lacking. Returning to the courtyard just as the waiter was serving their Pyms Cups, her heart felt heavy as a stone. "I was just remembering the first time we came here," she told Daniel. "And what a horrible, shallow person I was then." How else to describe her sense of alienation from her past self?

Daniel only laughed and said that that must explain what he'd seen in her at the time. Alice thought of the young woman, slimmer than her older self, well on her way to a major hangover, staring self-absorbed into the mirror. And then she thought of her own constant longing to meet an older self she believed had the answers, and wondered if there were any difference. She was lonely now. Maybe her older self wasn't. It stood to reason, given the difference age could make, that her older self had other needs altogether.

And even if she did meet her older self again, it wouldn't change anything. She'd still be Alice; she'd still be out of place in the world. The self could not, after all, reach across time and transfer the knowledge, understanding, and wisdom of one moment to another. And so Alice finally gave up trying to make a meeting happen.

9.

Alice was sixty-one when she nursed her mother through the final stage of raging, metastasized cancer. For three months her entire existence centered on making her mother as comfortable as possible. The rest of the world blurred around her, unreal, without interest, a set of inputs that abraded her senses when she noticed it. She strained to read her mother's slightest movement, to understand every grunt, whimper, and syllable, and to intuit her mother's every immediate need with a precision and alacrity verging on the telepathic. Ferocious in her will to serve her mother's needs, she let no one and nothing come between herself and them. She could not stop the cancer, but all

else bowed to her will. And so the world shrank to her mother and herself. And for a while it was almost as though she had acquired heft.

That brief sense of heft carried a price, for her mother's death left her feeling the lack more sharply than she ever had before. For months she flitted in and out of the place of chaos, uprooted and drifting, tethered by only the thinnest of filaments to blood and earth. And for a while she wondered if perhaps she might be schizophrenic, and whether the sense of lacking heft might be the root cause of the severest forms of psychosis. Everyone she knew saw her as a woman mourning the loss of her mother.

If Daniel had had just a little less heft, she would have slipped out of the world entirely. Perhaps the extremity of this dependence should have frightened her. But she was so caught up in the chaos and her desperate wish to understand that she did not pay it the slightest attention.

10.

As her mother's executor, Alice sorted her mother's papers and disposed of her possessions. She took from her mother's house three boxes of photographs and slides, some of them more than a hundred years old. Usually there was nothing more to identify the subject of the photos than a date on the frame or the reverse. Two adolescent girls in long dresses and hats held hands by the side of a lake; **1907** had been penciled on the reverse. Who were these girls? Alice wondered. Would she recognize their names if she knew what they were? Certainly they looked as though they had belonged in their world, endowed with the heft that any ordinary person enjoyed. But did that mean anything now, almost a century later? Alice shuffled through the pictures and wondered. There was an order to the world she could see in the photos, an order absent to the place of chaos.

And what did love have to do with any of it?

Tucked away at the back of a shelf in her mother's closet, Alice found a worn and cracked black leather book with the word **Photographs** stamped on its cover in gold. Only a fraction of its heavy black pages had photographs glued to them. Her mother had

never shown her the album, never mentioned having it. Alice recognized none of the people or places in the pictures, but knew, judging by the clothing, they could not possibly postdate World War I. All were carefully posed, both children and adults whether in couples, solo, or in groups. Women held one another or were shown picking fruit from trees or sharing the excitement of reading a letter together while standing against a wrought-iron fence. Often the men wore suits they looked uncomfortable in, and they posed handling a fishing rod, or standing near an early model of an automobile, or holding the leash of a chimpanzee dressed in a bellhop's uniform. A whole series of photos showed women in long black dresses and white aprons, solemn and poised, with palm trees exotically soaring behind them. The sole photo with a caption showed one of these women standing before a palm tree, a bicyclist riding past in the background; **herself in uniform** was written in script below it.

Who, Alice wondered, was "herself"? Alice never knew she had had relatives so long ago who had lived (however briefly) in a place where palm trees grew. Surely her mother would not have kept an album that had belonged to someone who had not been a blood ancestor?

Alice tried to imagine the history of this old, unfinished album, the story of how it had come to live on the shelf in her mother's closet. Her mother had been the executor of her own mother's estate. She must, Alice speculated, have found it in her mother's possessions, or perhaps gotten it from Aunt Sally, an unmarried, childless woman who had been the repository of old family treasures. Had her mother known who was in the photos? If she had, why hadn't she shown it to Alice? And if she hadn't, why hadn't she been able to discard the album (or even the loose, uncollected old photos of unknown men, women, and children jumbled together with more recent photos)?

Alice could not bring herself to toss the photo album into the trash. It could be of no real use or interest to her, and yet as a collection of photos, it possessed a certain authenticity, an integrity she could not question, presenting its images as documents of the world as it had once been.

Object that it was, worn, abandoned, unanchored in facts, names, and verifications: still it had heft. It belonged in the world, though the world had altered so radically—perhaps *because* the world of the album, the world that had made the album and of which the album was made, no longer existed. Might that be what gave it heft?

Pondering this question, Alice realized that her sense that an old thing could have heft did not extend to many old films. Cut off from the local cultural context in which they had been produced, the ability of their audience to make sense of them had become so attenuated as to make the flimsiness of scenery and actors speaking lines in scenes cut and pasted and dubbed so apparent as to threaten to reveal that only imagination and visual enchantment had ever held them together in the first place. And yet she saw nothing flimsy in the photos, all of which had been staged, and some of which distinctly reminded her of the early silent films, of situations constructed to resemble scenes the people taking the photos wanted to imitate—desiring, apparently, to reproduce the images they had seen at the movies, desiring in some way to make themselves into actors. She understood these desires—surely such modeling characterized American Modernity and formed the basis of the advertising industry, of television, of film: real people imitating the figures on the screen. Shaping their lives with careful, sometimes obsessive attention. As for the converse… film, after all, did not imitate life. It never had, and Alice could not imagine that it ever would.

She struggled to draw insight from the contrast she perceived, but it eluded her. When she tried describing the contrast to Daniel, he said that the photos were images of real persons and places and the films were not, and it was as simple as opposing reality to fantasy. Alice didn't think it was that simple. Clearly the photos incorporated the kind of fantasy that pervaded "real life"; and yet for Alice that didn't make them false, but added an inexplicable depth—maybe even the heft she felt so lacking in herself. Daniel's reasoning certainly didn't explain why she, like the old, abandoned, and now flimsy films, lacked heft.

As though she had stepped out of one of those films, from a world constituted by two dimensions and black and white, and was trying to pass herself off as solidly and substantially human.

11.

At sixty-four, when Alice, attending a conference in Chicago, made a quick trip to the town she had grown up in to revisit the scenes of her childhood, she went to the old, no longer used graveyard only because every other place she had known had been razed and replaced by condos, strip malls, and parking lots. Meeting ten-year old Alice, grieving at her grandmother's grave, Alice only then remembered that it was her grandmother's birthday. And the child's pain reopened the wound of a loss that she had lived with for fifty-five years. Comforting the child, she comforted herself.

"Little Apple, little Apple," she murmured to her scrawny, sobbing, younger self. Alice ached with desolation but she refused the temptation to take the child with her.

Alone in the wild, untended graveyard, Alice knelt in the weeds and cleared the three stones so that she could read the names and dates engraved on them. For several long moments, her being hummed with memories. The people buried here had given her life—charitably, however mistakenly. Her body remembered Apple's search for gravity and lay itself down on the stones, her head on her father's, her heart on her grandmother's, her knees on her grandfather's. Had she given them enough love? she asked herself. She thought of the rows of gleaming pint jars filled with slices of pickled beet lined up on the shelves in her grandparents' basement, tangible evidence of her grandmother's love—for her family, for good food, for the homely potential of the vegetables themselves that might otherwise have shriveled up and rotted unnoticed except by the worms and beetles that composted starchy roots left to rot in the soil. And for the first time she wondered whether she, Alice, gave enough love to the world. She thought of how often she recognized the world's beauty but felt shut out from it, unable to feel it in her own self. She had wanted the world to accept her, to make her feel

wanted by it. But she had never thought it was hers to love and had thus failed even to try.

The chill of dusk crept over the graveyard. Alice lay motionless against the stones. Her grandmother had told her; but Alice hadn't understood. She had loved this person and that one, and she had looked to them for heft. But for someone who did not naturally belong in the world, loving only individuals could never be enough.

Alice thought of how often she got caught up in the jagged chaos out of time. She considered her failure in the light of that fact. And she concluded that it was too late for her to do anything about it now.

12.

In the month following her encounter with her forty-six-year-old self, Alice, now seventy-two, thought obsessively about two things. One of these was death. Because she could not recall ever having met a self older than she was now, she knew that she might have come to the end of her encounters with herself and that this might be because her own life would soon be ending.

Although her obsession with this thought depressed her, she found it less painful than the second thought preoccupying her. And to stop herself from endless, do-nothing brooding, she assigned herself the task of setting her affairs and possessions in order. She did not tell Daniel what she was doing. But she did not conceal it, either.

And so it was that the morning after a dinner party she hauled half a dozen boxes of old photos and slides down to the dining room table and methodically sorted them into piles. One pile contained images of her mother's side of the family; a second pile, images of her father's; a third pile, images of the generations succeeding her grandparents' generation; and a fourth pile, images of Daniel's extended family. The fifth pile consisted of everything left over—images of their friends, places they had visited, and miscellaneous things that had interested them. Alice intended to make packages for various nieces and nephews; and if she had the time and stamina, she would label all the images she recognized.

"What is all *this*?"

Alice looked up from the work, glad to take a break. So much bending and reaching was making her back ache. Marian looked like she'd just woken up, her hair tangled, the skin on her face creased. "I need some coffee," she said, turning around and going back into the kitchen.

An old friend about twenty-five years younger than Alice, Marian was visiting for a month on a working vacation. They had first met during Marian's internship at the arts foundation where Alice worked. Discovering a shared passion for performance art, they'd developed a low-key friendship attending On the Boards events together. Marian usually stayed with Alice and Daniel when work brought her to town. She had once told Alice that she would probably never have even noticed she was "there" if it hadn't been for the On the Boards poster she'd mounted on her cubicle wall.

Marian returned with the thermos and a cup and sat at the end of the table, well away from the mess. Alice passed her the old black leather album. "Take a look at that," she said. "I found it in my mother's closet but haven't the faintest idea who any of the people in the photos are."

"There's a story here," Marian said when she'd looked at roughly half of the pictures. "These photos offer traces of a recognizable world, but one that has become opaque now that that world and the people in it are gone and no one bothered to write down their names or the stories the photos document."

"And everyone thinks a picture is worth a thousand words," Alice said as she continued with the sorting.

"People put a lot of store in genealogy," Marian said. "But if these people are your ancestors, then the question arises whether their pictures have greater significance to you as a sign of a general cultural history in your roots or as a sign of your specific genetic—genealogical—history."

Alice stared at Marian, whose gaze remained bent on the photos pasted to the heavy black pages of the album. Her impulse was to say she did not feel she had "roots" at all. Her only sense of connection with blood relatives was and had always been with

those individuals with whom she experienced close personal contact. She looked down at the picture in her hand, a yellowed color photo of her father holding herself at about eighteen months. What she saw in it, she realized, amounted to two individuals in close relation, not figures in relation to a world. Everything else looked like backdrop.

"Do you remember what you said at dinner last night? When Gerald was talking about how extreme and visible the disappearance of habitats and species had already become now in the Arctic Circle?"

Marian looked up from the album. "You mean about how the disappearance from public discourse of everything but individuals renders the elimination of species as well as entire human communities invisible and meaningless?"

Marian had claimed that the National Geographic mentality had made even nonhuman species visible only as collections of individuals. But species couldn't survive as a collection of discrete individuals—whether as personalities living in zoos or radio-tagged numbered members of populations inhabiting wildlife preserves. "Isn't your question about the album related to the atomization you were talking about? That we mainly think of people as atomized individuals perhaps embedded in but essentially distinct from the world rather than as being part of the world and engaged in its processes?"

Marian looked at her with what Alice uncomfortably recognized as surprise. Alice imagined her quickly revising a quarter-century's assumptions about her friend's intellectual capacity—and then told herself not to be an idiot. Marian had never treated her with anything but respect for her intelligence. "I think I see what you're getting at. As blood ancestors, distinct personalities whose genes you carry, they are first and foremost actors on a stage, bold-as-life characters surrounded by a simulation of 'real life'— analogous to the individual personalities that are all anyone can relate to in public discourse, where the complex processes of the world are flattened to a simulation that can be faked, the way the backdrop for television reporters is faked to make it look as though they're on the scene rather than standing on a sound-stage in a studio. Whereas looking at your ancestors as part of the world that made you… that's something else."

Alice glanced at the album Marian's hands held open. Would the heft of the world it revealed appear less if she knew who the figures in the photos were in relation to herself? Or even if she just had names to attach to the figures and stories to attach to the names?

Alice thought the question interesting but felt wary of applying any of its possible answers to her own problem. At seventy-two she was a little late trying to do anything about it, anyway. She had been out of place in the world for so many years the idea of generating heft now could only be academic.

13.

The second thought preoccupying her came to the fore once she'd gotten all her affairs and papers in order. Daniel, noticing a pattern in her activity, had questioned her closely about her most recent doctor's appointment but had let the subject rest when her answers indicated that only the usual chronic complaints were plaguing her. She could think of nothing she needed to say to anyone, no particular task she felt it urgent to finish. She had a few near and dear relationships, but no deep connection with the world. The world did not need her; the world did not *know* her. Her passing out of it might mean something to a few individuals, but it would mean nothing to the world. And why, she asked herself, should it? The world she had been living in had never been hers.

Though she ceased to think much about the likely approach of her death, the second matter on her mind fairly haunted her. What if she had been wrong to tell her younger self in encounter after encounter that they could only go back, go back to the world? What if she had been wrong to keep her selves separate? To not do what she could to explore, in league with her other selves, the place of chaos that lurked just outside the world? For years Alice had reasoned that every moment that they were face to face they were out of time, out of reality, out of any place at all. "It's no place, you're saying. It's nowhere." "So we can only go back, Alice, go back to the world." But what if she'd been wrong? What if the place she believed to be nowhere actually offered entry into another world— the one into which she should actually have been born?

She judged this question, also, to be academic. But it felt so real and pressing that each iteration of it caused her pain. She thought of little Apple and how she had turned her away, the older Alice comforting while rebuffing the younger one. Maybe her selves had been meant to combine into one, instead of being allowed to fragment into so many. What if she had taken ten-year old Alice home with her? Or if seventy-two year old Alice had merged at Hole-in-the-Wall with her fifty-three year old self? Maybe she would not have drowned like Narcissus. Maybe she had been thinking of the wrong story altogether.

14.

Two and a half years later, Alice met herself at aged three. She and Daniel were visiting a friend in Buffalo and decided to play tourist at Niagara Falls. The two of them inadvertently got separated, and Alice found herself looking on a scene straight out of a photograph she'd sent to her niece Flora. Three-year-old Alice was holding her father's hand. Old Alice stood off to the side and watched her mother take their picture with a quaint Kodak camera. She trailed after the family grouping and followed them discreetly back to Uncle Bob and Aunt Alta's house. Alice had never before stayed so long in her younger self's world, nor strayed so far from her point of entry. She felt like an intruder likely to be discover and expelled at any moment.

Little Alice was playing in a sand box in the backyard, happily alone and absorbed, when Alice approached and dropped to her knees in the grass nearby. "Hello, Apple," she said to the child. "What's that you're building?"

Little Alice flashed a smile at Old Alice and offered her a long and involved story. On and on it went, the story, about a host of imaginary persons and creatures and what the various mounds and trenches Alice had formed in the sand box represented inside the world of the story. And so the child prattled and gestured and built the world she was describing. Alice could not remember herself ever having been so happy.

"There's something I want to show you," Alice said to the child. Trusting and curious, the child sat in her lap and looked straight into her eyes. Without breaking her

lock on the child's gaze, Alice sensed they'd stepped into nowhere. She could feel the fissures rending the world around her. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a crack in the sky and the presence of chaos. But she kept her attention fixed on the child and held the child's attention fixed to herself even as she rose to her feet, for the child weighed not much more than an average bag of groceries.

Alice stepped back into the world she had come from, the world seventy-two years into the child's own future. "Mommy?" the child said. "Daddy?" The high, piping voice sounded thinner than it had when the child had been explaining the world she had been making in the sand box—thinner, almost threadbare. Old Alice noticed that in her world, the child weighed nothing at all, less even than the weight of a light cotton dress, less than the weight of the barrettes holding the unruly russet hair out of the child's eyes. Less certainly than the weight of the child when Alice had taken her from her world.

Although the child weighed nothing, and her voice could be heard only inside Old Alice's head, Old Alice herself felt strangely heavier than her bones could now seem to bear. The weight pulled at her legs, forcing her to her knees on the walkway of a condo complex she had no memory of having entered. The weight pulled at her heart, clutching it with claws of cold iron. And the weight pulled at her head, compressing her brain with a force that filled her eyes with a red haze and her ears with gray thunder. The weight was altogether more than she could ever manage to live with.

The man who found Alice just yards from his front door briefly glimpsed the shadow of a child on the sidewalk beside her. Voiceless, with only enough body to cast the slightest and thinnest of shadows, that one small fragment of young Alice's being wandered the future like a shade cast into Hades for the few minutes her specter had the energy to sustain.

And then it was gone.

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