

Philip Russell / HALLOWEEN

The loneliness was there first, the void wanting to be filled. Before I even knew Alice's name I was waiting for her. I made the light that attracted her, and she came into it, the single worst thing that would ever happen to me.

I never saw her come up to the back porch that night; I jumped at the sound of her knock. When I opened the kitchen door it seemed she had just materialized there, formed out of nothing, black eye and all. Her eye wasn't magical, I'll be the first to admit. It was singularly ugly: purple turning to green and yellow, the skin all cheesy and dead looking in the bare overhead light. It was a revolting black eye. I thought it was a joke initially, a Halloween disguise, and I stood with my hand on the doorframe, trying to smile. It was hard to look casual, though; the wood was old and splintery and you couldn't comfortably lean on it.

Except for her eye she had a very elegant face — high cheekbones and a fine distinct jaw. "Guinevere did that," she said, speaking first. I nodded slowly. "My bitch," she explained, stroking her temple gently with long fingers.

She didn't wear any makeup. Generally I preferred women without makeup, but with an eye like that it was different. She looked straight at me with it. "I was just bending down to feed her, and our heads collided. Hers was harder." I had no idea what she was talking about. When she smiled her lips tightened, stretching back over the narrow arch of her teeth. That was nicer than her eye; she had a magnificent smile. She lowered her hand and held it out to me. "I'm Alice. I called about the apartment."

I nodded my head again. "Right." I'd forgotten about the rental ad. "Matt," I said, and I took her hand, of course, but I didn't believe her one bit. I was learning about this town, and I was pretty sure some boyfriend had ruined her eye. Now here she was turning up at my door. Great. If I rented to her there'd be fights on the porch, me in

the middle, probably blood splattered around, maybe body parts, anything. No doubt my editor would expect me to cover it.

I'd been advertising for a month to sublet part of this house I couldn't afford. So far only three people had come to look at the rooms: a thin scruffy kid clearly running away from something; an old man without any teeth who showed up drunk; and a pretty young woman named Jackie who couldn't manage the security deposit and wondered if she could spread the rent out over time. I had to say no to Jackie — I was running out of money myself — but I've wondered since how things might have turned out differently. Life is all so confused with small choices, millions of them, and most of them don't mean a damn thing, really — you could almost leave them to chance. But always there are one or two that go on to change everything — and there's no way to tell those apart from the rest.

I lowered my gaze, not wanting to marvel at Alice's eye too much. She wasn't wearing a jacket, although it had been raining on and off all night — just an old reddish vest, goose down, thoroughly faded. She wore it unsnapped over a blue chamois shirt, tails loose and partly unbuttoned. She didn't look cold, though — only hurriedly dressed. I stepped back and held the door open.

She didn't act like a person who'd just gotten beaten up, either. Alice came inside bouncing, swinging blond hair and tight white pants. I couldn't help staring. The danger of loneliness is this: it puts you at risk.

"Can I keep dogs here?" she asked.

"I guess so." I looked at her face once more. "I like dogs all right. I had one when I was a kid." I closed the door behind her. "It was my stepfather's dog, actually."

"Great. This is the eighth place I've looked at. Landlords usually hate dogs." She stepped into the kitchen and took off her vest.

"I'm not really the landlord." I put my hand out for her vest, and hung it on the back of a kitchen chair. "I'm just subletting the place. Part of the place. Come on, I'll show you around." I was renting out the back ell, two rooms and a bathroom. Alice was walking down the hallway as if she already knew the house. "How come they hate dogs?" I asked.

"It's not just dogs: they hate kids, too." I looked at her closely. "No

kids." She grinned again. "Not yet. Three dogs, though." I nodded. "Big ones."

"I should ask my landlord."

The first room was hard and glassy, with windows facing each other across a quarter-sawn oak floor. My books were still there on temporary shelves along one wall. Alice stopped to look over the titles, mostly hunting and homesteading. A lot of field guides. "I'll move those out," I said.

"Don't you read fiction?"

I frowned slightly. "You don't need to make up stories."

"Really?" She laughed, running her fingertip slowly down the row of spines. "I could change your mind about that." She pulled out a volume on bow hunting and shook her head. "I know lots of stories." Riffing through the pages, she sighed, then snapped the book shut and shelved it. "More than you've ever seen between *these* covers." She looked at me curiously. I wished she didn't have that black eye. "I'll bring you a couple of novels," she said, "and some poetry. I work in the library sometimes. Let's see the other room."

She turned on her heel and walked toward the door on the far wall. The swing of her hips was arresting. I said, "You don't look like a librarian."

"It's my eye," she answered, without bothering to look back.

The end room was smaller, with windows on three of the walls. Outside the rain had increased; you could hear it pound against the clapboards, and the glass on the northern wall was running with water. I hadn't turned on the radiators in the ell, and the room felt stark and cold. Alice shivered, and turned away after a brief glance. "It feels like a grave back here."

"I should show you these rooms in the daylight."

"And with the heat on."

I followed her back through the dining room, where she ran her fingers over the dark table of soft five-quarter pine. I thought I heard her murmur "Leslie," as she went by, but that was impossible; it must have been "lovely."

We moved toward the fire in the living room. "These rooms we'd share, like the kitchen." My fire burned loudly, snapping on the hearth — the room smelled faintly of wood smoke. "What do you think?"

"This fire is nice. I like fires a lot." She turned slowly in front of it. "Fires are the heart of a place." She took off her chamois shirt; underneath she wore a tight knit jersey. She had wonderful breasts. When I looked back at her face I saw she was watching me, her smile amused and a little bit challenging. I bent down and poked up the fire, making it pop and spit sparks. When I turned around she'd crossed the room to the photograph on the far wall. "A pretty lady," she said, without looking at me. She leaned closer to the picture. "And pretty young."

The problem with loneliness is this: it gives everybody an opening. "Yeah. That was from Boston. When I was still a kid."

Alice came back and examined me for a moment. "You look like her a little, especially around the eyes." She turned and extended her hands toward the fire, palms open. "Pretty young," she repeated. Her hair was glowing in the firelight. It made her look like she had a halo, or at least an aura. "You're not related."

"Not anymore."

"You didn't grow up in Boston."

I looked at her back for a long moment before answering. She had a funny way of asking questions. "I grew up in Vermont. North of here. Boston's where I went to school."

"Do you like being back?"

"It's hard to meet people."

She glanced at me over her shoulder with her good eye. "That's always hard."

I shook my head. I was trying to start over, but I didn't know how to explain that to her. She stood in front of the fire and stretched languidly, hands clasped behind her head. I enjoyed watching her muscles flex, the long curve of her body arching like a bow, the fire backlighting her hair.

"Were *you* raised around here?" I asked.

"My family's always lived over the mountains," she said after a moment, without turning around.

"Do *you* like it?"

"It's okay. It's where I grew up." She shifted her weight to one leg, reaching over objects on my mantelpiece, keys and change, my jack-knife, my grandfather's old pocket watch. Beyond my compass and topographic maps were a small rabbit skull I'd found and bleached,

some crinoid fossils from Buttons Bay, a single dried rose and a dull yellow wedding band. "What's this?" she asked, turning toward me and holding out a small leather case.

Leslie had given me that, back when we were planning our return to Vermont together. "An Abney level. Sort of a pocket transit. I've been thinking of buying some land." I didn't remember whose idea that was anymore, hers or mine; dreams go back and forth through time, merging together, transforming.

Alice smiled broadly. "That's a coincidence." She really did have a wonderful smile. "I've been doing that, too." She pulled the instrument out of the soft leather pouch. "How does it work?"

"You sight through the eyepiece at your target, then set the level on top. You read the degree of slope on that curved scale. It gives you the lay of the land."

"The lay of the land. Hmm." She nodded her head slowly. "I've been walking land for the past year." She sighted on the ceiling light. "I want to build a kennel."

"Why?" I asked. I'd always thought of kennels as dog jails, full of little barred doors, rows of cinder block cells, fences around fences.

"Why not? I'm tired of having people hassle me about my dogs. Plus I could make money from boarding, and do some training." She adjusted the level. "Mostly I want to do some serious breeding."

"Serious breeding," I repeated without thinking.

She looked at me through the eyepiece. "Dogs. My dogs are registered kuvaszok. Guard dogs for sheep."

"Never heard of them." I smiled. "Sorry."

"I have two bitches and a dog, all early bloodlines." She lowered the level. "I've been saving for three years now." She frowned. "It's hard."

I nodded. "It's impossible."

Thin maple branches scraped the living room window. A wind was behind the rain now, taking the last leaves down. I put more wood on the fire. Alice sat on the floor in front of the fireplace, her back against the couch, and I sat close to her. I could smell her body — musty, earthy, like leaf mold. "I love fires," she said again. "They make a house alive. Like a brook on a piece of land." She leaned toward me a little. I glanced at her long white legs, my hands restless in my lap.

"It's nice to be here, Matt."

She was cut off abruptly by loud banging from the kitchen door; I had to get up to answer it. Alice went to use the bathroom. There were two older kids on the porch, wanting candy, not in costume but soaking wet. I gave them most of the candy I had: they were the only children to come all night. But no sooner had they run off than two more figures came up the walk — a misshapen yellow form bent awkwardly over a shorter, darker one, shielding it from the rain. In the circle of porch light I saw they were actually three people: a tough looking little kid and his young mother, who carried a child of three or four on her hip. Those two were wrapped in a dull yellow raincoat, I guessed her husband's.

I let them all right inside: it was insane to carry a little child around in that cold rain. The woman was pretty, with short black hair, squarely cut. She unbuckled her raincoat and put her daughter down on the floor. Under the raincoat her body looked lithe and muscular, but I must have admired it too openly or too long, because when I glanced away I saw Alice standing in the hall doorway, studying me critically. Her frown left me uneasy, feeling guilty, remembering my one infidelity with Leslie, that time beyond reason. Sometimes I think we're as mindless as molecules, our lives directed by hormones. Insensate machines, lubricated with adrenaline, estrogen, testosterone. And not very well lubricated, either — always there's friction, endless grinding, pieces fracturing from heat and stress.

Alice knelt beside the little girl, who pointed at her eye and giggled. She was dressed in gauzy white, with a halo smashed down around her head, her hair all in her eyes. Alice brushed it out of her face, smiling. "This is the last place," the woman said, turning to her son with a reproachful look.

The boy wasn't listening though: he was staring at me, and suddenly he shouted, "I know you! The newspaper man!" I looked him over carefully, but I didn't know him. He must have been on one of the grammar school tours I'd conducted ever since early September. Hundreds of children blurred together, the faceless masses. My editor thought it was good public relations. This kid looked like a little gangster — he didn't need any costume.

I smiled at the woman, reached down and tousled the boy's wet

head. "You should wear a hat," I told him. He frowned at me, snarling, twisted his head and snapped at my fingers with his teeth. I pulled my hand away fast. "Little shit," I thought, but I don't think I said anything out loud. Alice looked up at me though.

After they left Alice asked, "Do you always want to sleep with every woman you meet?"

I didn't know what to answer to that one. The thing is, the woman reminded me of Leslie. After a moment I said, "Would you like some cider?"

"Have you got any wine?"

I brought a bottle into the living room. Alice followed, turning out the ceiling lights on her way. Joining me in front of the hearth, she picked up the Abney level again. "So you're not a surveyor," she said.

"Nope. I came here to work for the newspaper. I'm a reporter. Learning to be a reporter." I handed her a glass of wine.

"That sounds pretty interesting."

"Actually it's pretty boring. Except for the deadlines. The deadlines drive everyone crazy. There's a lot of stress. And you make some enemies. The paper's always looking for new people." In fact I was ready to quit myself. The job wasn't what it was made out to be; being part of the salaried staff simply meant I didn't get paid for overtime. All autumn I'd done nothing but sit in front of my word processor until late every night, churning out copy. One night a week was all I had off, and by then I was usually so tired of people I'd hole up in my house, glad of the quiet space and the empty rooms.

"I always thought it would be exciting to be a reporter."

"I did, too." We touched glasses. "But it's not a very good job." Still, it was better than carpentry: I'd never do that again.

Once more there was knocking at the kitchen door, and I answered it frowning. Two ravaged people stood there this time, dark figures dripping water and swaying a little. The man wore a canvas hunting coat spotted with dried blood, and a gray slouch hat pulled down so low I couldn't see his face, just lank hair and beard. A woman skulked behind him, standing as far back from him as she could get and still remain sheltered by the roof. She was drenched to the skin, her skin pale and cadaverous, and her face was blotched or bruised — I couldn't tell which. When she opened her mouth several teeth were

missing, and her eyes glinted like ice in the yellow porch light.

I thought she was hissing — *asshole, you asshole* — but it was hard to be sure with the rain streaming off the roof behind her. I stepped forward, but so did the dark man — lunging at me suddenly with both hands outstretched. Yet there was no weight to him; nothing at all really except wetness, coldness. I threw him off easily, pivoting to the side. “Get out of here,” I said. “I’ll call the trooper.” And although I was braced and ready to fight him, I didn’t need to — he stepped back, crouching down; he never said a word.

The hissing continued behind me, however — *asshole, you’ll be so sorry you asshole* — and louder than before. But when I looked over my shoulder the porch was deserted. And when I turned back to the man in the canvas coat, he was gone too. I stepped off the porch into the dooryard.

The run-off from the eaves instantly drenched me; the rain was changing to sleet and the icy shock almost knocked me down. The yard was empty as far as I could see, and there was no sound anymore except the storm. I climbed back onto the porch and stood looking and listening for several minutes, then I went inside, closed the door and locked it.

In the living room Alice had turned off the rest of the lamps; only firelight illuminated the space. “You’re soaked,” she said. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure,” I answered, pushing wet hair back from my face. “It’s all right now though.” But my skin felt frozen. “I need to get a dry shirt and towel.”

“Who was at the door?”

“A couple of hill people. Not kids. A prank, I guess.” I started toward the bathroom. “Maybe connected to the newspaper.”

When I returned Alice had put some music on the stereo, with the volume down low — *Appalachian Spring*, the only classical music I ever liked. It was Leslie’s music, and I was positive I’d left it in Boston.

“That okay?” she asked.

“I guess,” I said. The music was as unsettling as everything else. “Sure,” I nodded, and sat down next to her, a little closer than before, wanting most of all just to pause for a moment.

“I’d like to live here, Matt.” She touched my glass a second time.

"I'd like that, too." We both drank.

We choose such ignorance sometimes.

We sat without talking for a while, sipping wine. The music filled the room like Leslie's spirit. At one point Alice moved closer to me, sliding a tiny bit across the floor so our bodies touched. She hummed something I couldn't understand; I asked her what it was. "That melody that keeps repeating is an old Quaker hymn," she explained. "'Tis a Gift.'" She sang the whole thing through, softly layering her words over the violins' melody. I leaned back against the couch and closed my eyes. I could smell Leslie's scent in the room — beautiful danger, inviting and repelling, sharp and sexual. Alice didn't speak after she finished, and the music on the tape continued quietly. At one point there was more knocking on the kitchen door. "Don't answer it," she said, and I was happy not to. The fire was warm on my face. I took a sip of wine and put my arm around her shoulders — it seemed the only thing to do.

But the knocking continued, loud and persistent, and finally I couldn't ignore it. Yet when I opened the door the porch was deserted. I walked the length of the rain swept deck, searching the forsaken night. It was all just empty darkness, vacant coldness wetly stretching away. I turned and went back inside.

Alice was standing in front of the fire; when she asked me who was there, I said, "No one. A joke. Kids." I put my hands on her shoulders, but her shoulders were cold. Her whole body was cold — I could feel the chill emanate through her clothes. I looked at her face and her black eye was just staring straight ahead. I got up to put more wood on the fire, although the room was already uncomfortably warm. Alice moved closer to the hearth. I stepped to her other side, so I wouldn't have to look at her eye.

"I should go," she said.

"Not yet."

She smiled. I reached out to her. She shook her head. "I'll stop by tomorrow," she said, then she was gone.

From the porch I watched her car's lights dim and then disappear into the wet darkness. But I didn't stand there staring after they winked out — it was too cold and raw. Winter was coming fast; you could smell that, too. I went inside to the fire and sat on the floor with

my back against the couch, the heat and light full in my face. I slid my hand into my pocket, my fingertips touching the slip of paper with her phone number. I closed my eyes. The danger of loneliness is this: you get used to it. And getting used to it isn't as hard as it should be. After a while it doesn't even seem wrong. That's the scary part.

I got up once to get the wine bottle and refilled my glass. I sat there for a long time, watching the fire burn down to embers, sipping the wine, filled with the bitter red glowing of it. I kept trying to recall the sound of Alice's voice, but couldn't, so I replayed the music she'd chosen, listening carefully, trying to hear the exact sound of her song. But I only remembered two lines, *'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free*, and I never heard her voice at all.

I put more wood on the coals, and tried to recall her face, but couldn't do that either. Not with any precision. The sweep of blond hair across her forehead was clear enough, but where it fell on her head and shoulders the detail blurred. I could picture her blue eyes distinctly — the large pupils and striated iris — but the face around them was hazy and dull. Even her injured skin was hard to see definitely. There was a clear image of very fine, downy blond facial hair, the fire backlighting her profile. I could see her wide grin, her compressed lips, but the delicate angularity of her cheekbones and jaw just went in and out of focus, never stopping at a place that was real. I couldn't recall the exact shape of her body, and the harder I tried, the more indistinct everything became.

There was a noise at the door, but it was clear through the side window it wasn't Alice, and I closed my eyes again and sipped some more wine, trying to solidify things, wishing it were already tomorrow. I felt as if I were standing on the edge of my life, shifting centers, putting into motion a thing without limits.

Sitting still became impossible. I got up and wandered through the empty house, looking for any tangible evidence of her visit, wanting to touch things she'd touched, trying to make things concrete. I went back to the ell, flipped on the light in the first room and pulled out my volume on bow hunting, riffling through the pages as she had. I went further back, but there was nothing in the last room except black rain-streaked glass. I tried to feel it as Alice's room, but it felt like the outside, smelled cold and raw, and I left quickly, thinking of graves.

In the bathroom there was a hairbrush like Leslie's, and under the chair in the kitchen I found a large dog biscuit that must have fallen out of Alice's down vest. Near it were two tiny white feathers, no bigger than my thumbnail. I picked them up and went back to the living room. Her wine glass stood on the floor next to the hearth. I looked on the mantle for the Abney level, but it wasn't there — a volume of Yeats lay in its place instead. I read the poem the book opened to, about a man who once glimpsed a magical girl, then spent the rest of his life searching for her. The lines made me sad and I closed the book, put it back on the scarred wood and set the feathers on the worn green cover. I sat against the couch again, the fire hypnotic and glowing. The warmth and the wine made me sleepy, and I dozed off to dream about a beast with black eyes.

The danger of loneliness is this: you tend to adopt it. It's so small at first, sniffing around, that you feel sorry for it. You talk to it and pet it and after a while start to feed it. Eventually you give it a name. With each day it grows larger. Soon it needs always to be fed. It sits on your hearth each night, waiting for your return. You can never feed it enough. Finally you understand that it's *you* the beast wants to consume.

I woke up convinced I heard breathing. The fire had almost gone out and the room was dark. I shook my head in disgust. I'd been there before: it was just a trap. Leslie never kept the beast away; somehow she *became* the beast. Too much loneliness and too much testosterone, a hopeless combination.

I piled more wood on the fire. The dry pine caught quickly; soon flames chased each other up the chimney. I watched the flames and listened to the quiet of the house settle around me, and for just a moment everything felt held at bay, almost peaceful. I felt full of sudden resolve: I'd call Alice and just tell her my landlord wouldn't accept dogs, period. I'd concentrate on remembering her black eye.

I looked at my watch. It still wasn't that late, so I picked up the telephone. Alice answered on the first ring. She said "Matt" before I could speak. She sounded just like Leslie. I could hear her breathing across the telephone lines. I closed my eyes. The wine made me feel dizzy. Spirits filled the room, souls wandering around at will. In the quietness of my house I could hear breathing. "Come on over," she said.

And all I could feel then was an aching in my heart. Or perhaps it was between my legs. I don't know. I feel like that machine sometimes, a body, an animal thing, a beast myself, intent on its own destruction. Alice was silent a long time, waiting for me to speak. Finally I said, "How do I get there?"