

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

By Sue Jackson

First published in 03 in *Brain Surgery: an anthology of short stories* nmit

A year ago, when I started writing fiction, I found the first story I wanted to tell was inspired by my friendship with a wonderful family therapist, who died in 1989. This story is dedicated to the memory of Anita Morawetz.

Alice's magic beguiled me from the start. Fine-boned, with intense eyes and frequent quizzical expression, she seemed all head. Her aureole of tawny cork-screw curls was like a neon ad for the size of her brain.

From the time I'd first heard about her, I had Alice on a pedestal – her therapeutic work in London had been ground-breaking. So, when I finally saw her in the flesh, I hung back, watching her from a distance. At that workshop, the seas parted before her, as she targeted a succession of colleagues for fervent and animated conversations. She expertly worked the room and obviously had lots of deals to do. Eventually, I thought, *What have I got to lose?* So I jumped in with both feet.

"I've only just got back from the States, and it's really hard to fit in." She listened to me with head cocked. I had her full attention.

"Come to the Institute next Tuesday and we can see some families together," she ordered. On Monday night I had great trouble sleeping.

The next day, as I watched Alice directing family members to their seats with the imperious hand gestures of a traffic policeman, I was reminded of Bali. One hot steamy night saturated with the pungent odour of coconut oil, I'd taken a trip to a village that was hosting a performance of the Wayang Kulit, the shadow puppet theatre of Indonesia. As we entered the dark village, light emanated from a small temple in its centre. The performance had already begun. Children and adults screamed and laughed as they anticipated the

actions of the puppets, whose silhouettes were projected onto a cloth screen. I noticed how some audience members chose to watch the event from behind the screen, and I followed their lead, sometimes watching the large dramatic shadows at the front of the house, sometimes crouching behind the scenes, where the dalang, the holy puppet master, created magic.

Alice had the puppeteer's control as well as the disregard for whether we saw behind the screen or not. She was always straightforward.

“Stop saying ‘interaction’!” she directed me on my first day of working with her. “No one in the family knows what you’re talking about!” I was beginning to see why everybody praised Alice, but were slow to work with her. On that first day, I often escaped to the safe darkness of the viewing room where I could watch her through the one-way mirror as she worked. Her recent, airy words of feedback to me, “You know, you’d be a much better therapist if you just stopped trying so hard to be liked” played on a loop in my head, as I sat there blinking in the darkness. And yet I was astonished by her virtuosity. I sat squeezing my hands together, to stop myself from clapping. But whatever happened to encouragement? When she stopped me in the corridor at the end of the day, I had my own feedback ready, as well as my rational reasons for not returning to the Institute.

“So, what about next week?” she said, her curls still zinging with energy. My mouth opened.

“Fine”, I replied.

Behind her back, Alice's students dubbed her ‘Thesaurus Alice’. She was a maestro with words - never missed a beat - and how she could make them perform! This was something she had in common with her husband Sunil, an Indian film maker. One day, shortly after we started working together, Sunil and Alice drove behind me into the car park. As we slowed to negotiate the speed bumps, I watched in the rear view mirror as Sunil managed

to drive and debate at the same time. I could see him listen to a clincher from Alice. They both laughed wildly, and she punched him, lightly and playfully, on the arm. They were still laughing when, with a dramatic flourish, he opened her door and handed her out. She didn't speak about Sunil often at work, but when she did, she glowed.

Several months later, Alice had organised for two friends from London to present a workshop in Melbourne. Participants were registered and seated, the presenters were ready to roll, but for once she arrived at the venue late. I had been on the lookout for her and intercepted her in the car park. She looked flushed and distracted.

"I don't believe this – I've left my introductory notes at home," she hissed as we hurried inside. She ran her hands through her hair, panting. There was a long pause before she said, with an edge of contained panic,

"I couldn't remember how to get here. I just drove around and around and I just couldn't remember where it was." She gripped my arm and asked me to introduce the guests. As I did so she sat straight and smiling in her chair, professional and attentive to all around her. A few days later, she was diagnosed. A malignant brain tumour. Surgery scheduled for the following week.

As planned, we met with the London colleagues for dinner at a Greek restaurant. Alice ate all her lamb and some that I couldn't eat. She wore a soft green spider's web of a shawl and a Middle Eastern necklace of green, tortoiseshell and black beads with silver filigreed clasps. The round and heavy green beads in particular were impossible to resist caressing. After a short time on the body they heated up, or so Alice said. Her friends bravely entertained us with stories of Alice's exploits in England. How she had totally alienated one doyen of family therapy when, in a student review, she had impersonated her so accurately that the woman never spoke to her again. Alice reddened and laughed and leaned towards her friends. The candlelight coaxed sparks from her necklace. Her friends, who were

returning home the next day, lingered. No one wanted the evening to end. It was the night before her admission.

On the morning of her surgery, I got a call from the hospital. It was Alice, in pre-op., with a message for me to pass on to her students. She wanted them to work on a problem in her absence - *How might a crisis affect a family presenting for therapy?* was her hypothetical question. *A crisis such as a brain tumour in one of its members.*

The emergency helicopter, like a giant praying mantis, was just alighting on its pad as I arrived at the hospital. For some moments, the noise of its blades drowned out the roaring of my stomach. I followed the yellow painted stripe on the floor from the car park to the neurology ward, hoping that like the cowardly lion, I'd discover my courage on the way. I was shocked when I arrived at her bed. I'd never seen Alice in a nightie before. Her upper arms were sinewy and insubstantial. Underneath they looked pallid, dappled and dry. Alice turned her exhausted head to me,

“Why do I have to be a trail blazer in everything?”

After her discharge, Alice organised her radiotherapy en route to work so that she could arrive punctually for her training sessions. Nausea and sleepiness were the terrible twins she battled every day. Her reputation for being acerbic and decisive no longer quite fitted. She seemed to be in softer focus. I kept waiting for the verbal jousting, the critical jab, the old Alice reappearing with some blunt and accurate rejoinder. At a workshop, I was surprised to see that I had my arm around the back of her chair. I wondered if she'd mind even if she noticed.

During the workshop break, she said to me: “Have you noticed that I seem to be forgetting things lately and that I've been a bit muddled?” For the previous few weeks,

when I was with Alice, I'd often had difficulty swallowing. My throat felt full. That day was no different. Even so, "Yes" managed to slip through.

One day soon after, our colleague, Fran, was interviewing the Cameron family. Alice and I were behind the screen. As the family members started to pull at the loose threads in the hand knit of their lives, Alice, as always, became instantly engrossed. I slumped further down in my seat and rested my feet on the window sill below the screen. I wished I could rest my head on her shoulder. As I sat next to her, listening to the anguish of the family, I realised that, for me, the Camerons would always remain shadows. Inexorably, the session droned on.

"Help! I'm absolutely stuck. We're going round in circles."- Fran joined us, demanding assistance.

"Sorry, Fran", I said, "I'll have to pass."

Alice looked at me, accusingly: "Have you been asleep?"

Fran returned to the family and Alice and I settled back in our chairs. The noise in front of the screen provided a stark contrast to the silence behind. Alice's question about seeming muddled, like a whirlwind, had sucked any words we might have spoken into its vortex. The session was coming to an end. Anne Cameron and her sons were poised on the edges of their seats, jackets back on, the boys with mobiles at the ready. Fran moved into her concluding remarks. Alice listened for a few minutes and then began to pack her things into her briefcase and extract her diary. Finally, agitated, she burst out, "Will she never finish? She doesn't need to reiterate. When will she ever learn that therapy's all about timing and pacing?" I looked over at her in astonishment.

"It's time to let them go!" she said, snapping her briefcase shut. "It's over."

Alice embarked on a course of chemotherapy. Its effect was short-lived. She no longer opted to be the therapist in the room with the family. Gradually she began to struggle to

find the correct word and would sit silently for lengthening periods in the darkness behind the screen.

At our final session with the Camerons, we had barely settled into our seats in the dark when Alice, looking straight ahead through the one-way mirror, spoke slowly and laboriously words that were obviously well-rehearsed.

“Janine, I need you to do something...for me.” She crossed her arms over her chest and hunched forward. “Tell me... when I shouldn’t come into... work any more.” She paused and breathed in deeply. “You’re the only one... who knows... how good I used to be.”

The following Monday night, Sunil rang me in tears. He said that they’d had a hard week. Alice had been unsteady and had had a couple of falls. But she was insistent that she had to come into work. Next morning, Sunil drove right up to the main door. I watched through the Institute windows as he bent at the knees, supporting her with his weight, and eased her gently out of the passenger seat. Alice stood still for a moment to get her balance. He bent down as she tipped her head back and looked into his eyes. They exchanged a chaste kiss on the lips. With his hand under her elbow, Sunil walked her into work.

Alice kept coming into work right up until two weeks before she died – she remained her own puppet master to the last.

That night in Bali, I stayed till after the end of the Wayang Kulit. I watched as the theatre was dismantled by three slightly-built and unassuming village men. It was a long time before I realised, with a little start of surprise, that I was watching the dalang and his two acolytes. I saw that the larger-than-life, intricate puppets were in fact small structures of metal struts and painted leather, the brilliant pyrotechnics the product of coconut oil lamps, the temple a shed. Yet the incandescence of the performance lighted my way home.