

One of my Favourites, Alice . . . Incomplete was shortlisted in the 2017 Tasmanian Writers Prize and published in the Forty South Short Story Anthology.

Alice . . . Incomplete

If you take your time, you'll see the red mouse leading with its whiskers – mischievously misappropriating – and the rabbit who whispers sense and sensitivity (amidst the nonsense) to Alice when all else is anarchy.

What is your favourite colour, Alice? That's what old Mr Carlisle, who lived next door, asked her when she was ten. *Blue*, she told him.

Blue, Alice?

She said she liked the colour of the sky in the middle of summer when there was a light haze, the colour of her grandma's slippers. The Whippleton's letterbox. *The letterbox?* Mr Carlisle said the Whippleton's letterbox was more of a pale green but Alice told him it looked blue if she squinted at it.

When life overwhelms her, Alice drifts into the blue, draws it around her like a shroud, sinks into it. Alone in her sea of tears, she is girt by blue.

Mr Carlisle gave her a present. For no reason. A pair of ribbons, neatly folded and wrapped in tissue paper. *Alice Blue*, he told her, and she was dumbfounded. Someone had named a colour after her. And the colour was perfect; an icy azure tint that, in a certain light, seemed almost white. A happy-melancholy colour that would sustain her through the years of deep indigo depression, the light at the end. Of the tunnel. Of the burrow. Of the funk. She would come out into it, elated by her survival, the joy muted by grief, for the light could never be clear and white; it would always be tinted Alice Blue.

She liked Mr Carlisle once. But he turned out to have an agenda. Those Alice Blue ribbons were the key to a chapter she didn't understand. She thought Mr Carlisle may have been the start of her blueness, the beginning of the bleak. But perhaps it had begun much earlier.

Sometimes Alice dreamed of her father, interchangeable with Mr Carlisle, indistinguishable in his caresses and whispers. Her efforts to dismiss the dreams were stymied by her Aunt Sondra's knowing stares. Her father's sister would talk to her about memories which should remain buried. *Men are men*, she whispered. She seemed angry with Alice, constantly reminding her that every girl has responsibility over her own body. Aunt Sondra had rivers grooved into her upper lip which became more pronounced when she sniffed and pursed, something she did regularly when Alice's father entered the room.

After Mr Carlisle's strange touchings and viewings came the betrayal of Eloise Whippleton, she of the green/blue letterbox. Eloise pretended to be Alice's friend and Alice confided in her; about her Aunt Rose's suicide, her mother's fondness for Crème de Menthe at breakfast time, and about Mr Carlisle's frighteningly tender smile when he removed the Alice Blue ribbons and ran his fingers through her hair. Once, when Alice was away from school, Eloise told all those precious secrets to the kids on the bus. Alice never spoke to her again and never squinted at her letterbox; she looked at the sky whenever she walked past Eloise's house, even after the day she tripped into the pepperry shrubs.

Sometimes Alice's whole world turns misty blue. Or a deep navy or a royal thunderous blue/black that roils and bubbles toward her with its white tips and ferocious froth. She can go deep into that winter blue. She is an island sinking under the weight of it. But, on good days, the world looks like Alice's favourite colour. Pale and soft and gentle. Alice Blue.

Alice's parents took the family to Brisbane last year. They went by ferry from Devonport – mother, father, two boys and a girl – then by road. Hunter, eight, and six-year-old Drake were easily excited, especially by big things like the Banana and a concrete dinosaur. A planned trip to Dreamworld disappeared in hushed tones. People died on a raft ride and the park was closed. Mothers and fathers marooned in a scrambled mess in the blue.

In Brisbane, the family stayed with a childless uncle, husband to Alice's auntie who years ago had found her own shade of blue too deep to cope with. Uncle Keith is a sad man and Alice's parents deflated around him. The family escaped from his claustrophobic world to visit the museum – with its wag-tailed dinosaur and wailing whales – and the art gallery. And that's where Alice clapped eyes on *The Blue Alice*.

Look at the white daisies littering blue fields and you might sense the calm chaos that surrounds her.

For a few minutes, she wondered if Charles Blackman knew her but soon realised the painting existed long before she did. Still, he had captured her. How did he find the essence of her, the part that only she could normally see? Alice's tears erupted and her mother said she was overtired. Alice told her father she could hear piano music when she stared at the painting and her stomach caught butterflies like on a theme park ride. Her father said she was overly-affected by the Dreamworld tragedy.

As early as pre-school, it was evident that Alice had lurched ahead of her contemporaries; gifted, her parents said. Bright. Advanced. Geeky, according to her contemporaries. Or, as Alice's high school maths teacher remarked, precocious.

Long after Mr Carlisle and a year or two on from Eloise Whippleton's betrayal, Alice presented herself to her maths teacher, Mr Hynes. Presented is a deliberate word. Alice gift-wrapped her body and laid it at his feet. The Alice Blue ribbons were long gone but she wore blue jeans and a powder blue cardigan and she giggled and unwrapped herself for Bill – *call me Billy* – Hynes. He caressed her mind with numbers and algebraic conundrums and touched her still-girlish body, stirring needs and desires hitherto hinted at, but hibernating. She floated on pale fluffy clouds, light as a whisper of wind.

Her advanced intelligence didn't stop her from thinking herself in love with the teacher and it didn't help her to prepare for Billy Hynes's disappearance. Transferred, they said. Interstate. He never warned her and she frayed and floundered in her lake of tears. The Alice that Billy Hynes knew so intimately was thirteen.

After she saw *The Blue Alice*, she felt less alone. She was replicated on a canvas in Brisbane. No matter what happened now, even if she disappeared, she would always be there as a painting. They wouldn't destroy it. They might move it sometime but surely only to another gallery. Blue Alice is almost indestructible; a part of the world, in all her beautiful daisy-and-mouse-filled glory.

The day after her first entrapment by the Blackman painting, Alice had begged to be allowed to return. Too young to be on her own in the city, her father said. But her mother argued for her. She might only be fifteen but wasn't she light years ahead in intelligence? Alice's father would not be swayed so while her mother took the boys to build sandcastles at South Bank, he accompanied his daughter to the art gallery. Her father tried to interest her in other exhibited works and she spent a few moments with *The Cypriot*, disturbed somehow by

the blue-tinged stubble. The ultramarine shirt and red tie summoned piano and violin but it was deep and harsh in that Bach-on-a-bad-day way so she quickly returned to *The Blue Alice*.

Her father sidled up to her and whispered something about secrets but Alice wasn't really listening. She had jumped into her painted self and was communing telepathically with the rabbit.

Most people see just the girl . . . just Alice. But look closely. She is shy. She shakes. Blue lines surround her eyes.

That night, Alice's mother said she found her daughter's reactions to the painting disturbing and thought Alice might need to see a psychologist or counsellor. This was the discussion over dinner after Alice's father told how she had fainted in the gallery. If Alice was horrified at the thought of some stranger digging around in her brain, her father seemed beyond terrified. Alice could barely remember the secrets they shared and she didn't want some professional hauling them out to air in crisp daylight.

Does she seem unstable, standing there on one leg? The truth is, she is constantly wobbling, whether propped on one foot or tentatively grounded with two. The world is unsteady beneath her.

And so it was; that night, after the gallery fainting, at the dinner following her communion with the rabbit, precisely at 8.12 pm, Alice decided she would leave home on the day of her sixteenth birthday. She had two months to plan and dream and visualise, to make a life for herself.

The life in which Alice becomes an artist

She took a direct flight from Launceston to Brisbane and, using the start-up money inexplicably but forcibly given to her by her father's sister Sondra, she moved into a share

house with three other students. A trio of artists morphed into a quartet consisting of a budding film director, two writers (one a scribbler of esoteric poetry, the other a novelist) and Alice, the burgeoning painter. Alice took various jobs – a waitress in the library café, a life-drawing model, a children’s birthday-party clown – and hoarded her money. She ate two-minute noodles and savoury rice and trawled supermarket aisles for free tastings.

Her first exhibition – *Blue* – at the age of twenty made her an overnight sensation:

- *Vacillating between a carnival of the grotesque and an almost naïve normalcy . . .*
- *Capricious and unsettling . . .*
- *Beyond visionary, into the realm of indescribable beauty . . .*
- *. . . provoking exquisite retinal pleasure.*

The largest painting *Shades of Blue* and the smallest *The Letterbox* sold for equal record-breaking prices.

She should have been ecstatic but she thought happiness to be an unreal concept.

Alice was courted, variously, by an English Earl, a number-one ranked tennis player, and a poet of portly proportions who immortalised her in his now famous sonnet *Ice Blue*. You’ve likely as not studied it, surely at least heard of it. *Oh/She with the iced hue/famously, infamously, constantly blue . . .*

The most well-known of her paintings *Island Blue* was a surrealistic homage to her home-state. Covered in tinted ice and snow and trees and lakes, it is considered the definitive *Study in Blue*. Alice gifted it to Hobart’s Museum of Old and New Art on the condition that it never leave the state.

Alice never married, once telling a reporter she was *most definitely frigid* and that she was *an island unto herself*. She continued a prodigious output until being hospitalised following a minor fall when she was thirty-two. Two days later she died of sudden ventricular fibrillation.

The life in which Alice drops into the rabbit hole

Reclining on the deck of the Spirit of Tasmania, she breathed deeply and imagined the good life ahead.

When she couldn't find work in Melbourne, she hooked up with a street artist named *Just Jack* and they hitchhiked their way to Sydney, sleeping under a roadside picnic table and in the back of a Ute.

In Sydney, they dossed with *Just Jack's* friends in a King's Cross backstreet where the constant traffic of strippers, prostitutes and drugs proved, at first, baffling, and eventually, comforting for Alice. *Just Jack* stayed just as long as Alice's savings lasted and then he thumbed his way back to Melbourne. Alice fell in love with Drago who bought her fancy jewels and taught her how to please a man. She did whatever he asked of her and she was strangely happy with her street-smart life. Then Drago was deported and the man left in charge had no room in his heart for Alice.

So she, quite naturally and organically it seemed, fell in love with heroin and her life became a merry-go-round of prostituting to score and scoring to prostitute until she was completely lost and withdrawn.

Socially isolated. That's what Marcus said. She met Marcus from the Wayside Chapel when she was twenty-three. He helped her to get on the methadone program at St Vincent's, and worked on dissolving her social isolation.

In the bowels of a Sydney studio, there will be nestled some television footage featuring an interview with a softly smiling Alice who speaks of her journey through homelessness and disenfranchisement, into part-time employment, thanks to the *remarkable kindness and mentorship* of the Wayside Chapel staff. Alice's blonde hair is hacked into

chunks, a cubist head a-la-Picasso, her blue eyes goth-shadowed. Alice, in that footage, emanates hope, a quiet optimism.

Two years after that interview, she would be dead.

But first, she scaled the heights of stand-up comedy:

- . . . *fearlessly taking comedy to the darkest of places*
- ... *winning last year's Barry award at the Melbourne Comedy Festival . . .*
- *Magnificently manic!*

At the peak of her fame, heroin called to her again and dragged her back down into the deep blue. She returned to the streets of King's Cross and, despite the best efforts of so many, she could not find her way to the surface.

Marcus from the Wayside Chapel pieced her final day together as best he could. There's a report, long archived. She had missed her regular 'done session at St Vincent's and had stolen a framed Charles Blackman print from a Darlinghurst boutique. Alice's note was *vague and cryptic* but hinted at her depression. According to Marcus, she had previously made mention of her *inability to climb out of the rabbit hole*. In her suicide missive, she wrote that she was *an island, surrounded by blue* and that she wanted to *be one with the rabbit*. The Blackman print was almost obliterated by her blood.

The life in which Alice 'gets on'

Upon their return to Launceston, Alice's mother insisted on counselling for her daughter. Alice's father fought feverishly against the idea but it became important enough for Alice's mother to insist and to decide to seek help for her own alcoholism, and so it passed that mother and daughter attended some sessions together and spent time bonding with their separate but connected issues.

Alice talked her mother out of pressing charges against their old neighbour and the maths teacher Bill Hynes and she vehemently refused to discuss any accusation against her father. *But you know he did*, Alice's mother coaxed. Yes, Alice knew. But knowing and proving are two entirely different things. *I'm not strong enough*, she told her mother. *I don't remember enough*. So Alice's mother contented herself with kicking her husband out of the house and out of her life and Alice reneged on the promise she made to leave home on her sixteenth birthday.

Alice was awarded a university scholarship and studied law, before switching to medicine, eventually finding her niche in urology. As a specialist, she was highly regarded for her pioneering work in robotics. She married a concert pianist and adopted three children from rural China.

Alice remained close with her family, usually hosting Christmas lunch for Hunter and his wife and brood of five children, Drake and his partner with their two huskies (for which Alice wrapped bones in tissue paper to place under the tree), her mother and whichever lover was the chosen one in any given year, her own husband and children, as well as various neighbours, lonely work colleagues and visiting orchestral musicians. Her beautiful daughters Portia, Olive and Masie excelled at school and in their music and extracurricular activities.

When Portia turned fifteen, she ran away from home, leaving a note accusing her father – Alice's faithful handsome husband – of impropriety in the extreme. Alice's husband had disappeared.

Alice responded thus:

- She sharpened the classic Shun knife she always used to carve the Christmas turkey.
- She found Portia and deposited her at Alice's mother's house, along with Olive 10, and Maisie 6, where no questions were asked and much comfort food was baked.

- Alice left instructions that, under no circumstances, was her husband (should he ever deign to return) to have access to the girls.
- Having failed to locate her husband, Alice drove 260 kilometres to her father's dilapidated weatherboard shack in Geeveston (she had not seen him since her mother kicked him out but she'd always kept tabs on his location). She found her father working at his still inside a shipping container in the back yard.
- Alice stabbed her father thirty-one times, the combined number of years her children had been alive, a fact never examined for its coincidence or otherwise.
- Alice stabbed herself once, precisely, decisively, expertly.

Alice turns sixteen tomorrow.