The Agony of Alice

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survive sixth grade?

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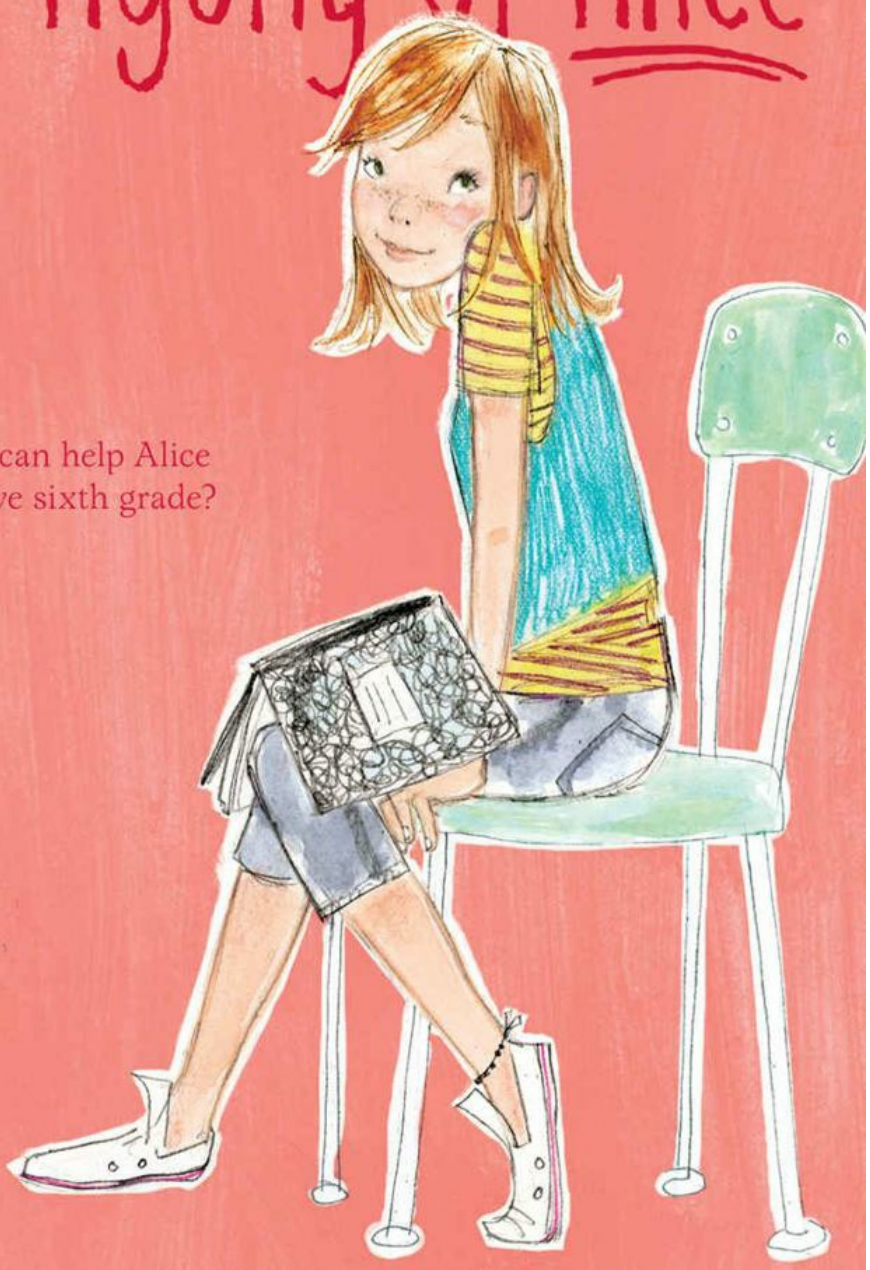

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To my sister Norma

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KISSING TARZAN

THE SUMMER BETWEEN FIFTH AND SIXTH grades, something happens to your mind. With me, the box of Crayolas did it—thirty-two colors including copper and burgundy. I was putting them in a sack for our move to Silver Spring when I remembered how I used to eat crayons in kindergarten.

I didn't just eat them, either. One day when I was bored I stuck two crayons up my nostrils, then leaned over my desk and wagged my head from side to side like an elephant with tusks, and the teacher said, "Alice McKinley, what on earth are you doing?"

Thinking about those crayons and that teacher was so embarrassing that it made my palms tingle, my neck hot. Surely, I thought, it was about the weirdest thing I'd ever done. And then, after I'd packed the Crayolas, I found a copy of a poem I had written in third grade:

There are lots of drops in the ocean,
There are lots of stars in the blue;
But in the whole state of Maryland,
There's only one person like you.

I stopped worrying about the crayons and cringed at the poem. Do you know who I wrote it for? My father? My grandfather? Aunt Sally? The mailman, when he retired. I hardly even knew him.

The reason I worry about my mind is that as soon as I remembered the mailman, I wondered if he was still alive, and somewhere, deep inside me, I sort of hoped he wasn't. I didn't want anybody remembering that poem. I wondered if my kindergarten teacher was alive, too. If I met her on the street

tomorrow, would she still remember me as the girl with Crayolas up her nose? Those were absolutely the two most ridiculous things I had ever done in my life, I thought, and then I remembered this big piece of cardboard back in fourth grade and this boy named Donald Sheavers.

Donald was stupid and good-looking, and I liked him a lot.

"Come over and watch television, Donald," I'd say, and he'd come over and watch television. Any channel I wanted.

"I guess it's time for you to go home, Donald," I'd say later, and he'd go home.

I'll bet if I'd ever said, "Wear your clothes backward, Donald," he'd have worn his clothes backward. But I never asked him to do that because, as I said, I liked him. Then I found this big sheet of cardboard.

It came in a box with our Sears washing machine. Dad couldn't fix the old one, so we got a new deluxe model, and I got to keep the cardboard.

I was lying out on the grass in the shade on my cardboard looking up at the box elder and I remembered this old Tarzan movie I'd seen on TV. Tarzan and Jane were on a raft on the river, and they were kissing. They didn't know it, but the raft was getting closer and closer to a waterfall, and just before it went over the rocks, Tarzan grabbed hold of a vine, picked up Jane, and swung to shore. That was all. But suddenly I wanted to know what it felt like to be kissed on a raft with my life in danger. That's when I thought of Donald.

"Donald," I said when he came over, "you want to be in the movies?"

"Yes," said Donald. He even looked like Tarzan. He had dark hair and brown eyes, and he went around all summer in cutoffs.

I told him about the raft and the waterfall, and I sort of rushed through the part about kissing. "We can't do it," Donald said. "We don't have a river."

"We'll just have to pretend that, Donald."

"We don't have a vine," he told me.

I got a rope and tied it to a branch in the box elder.

I was afraid he'd complain about the kissing next, but when the rope was ready, he said, "Okay. Let's do it."

And suddenly I thought of all kinds of things we had to do first. We had to be chased through the forest by pygmies, and then there was this quicksand and an alligator, but finally we made it to the raft, and Donald came crashing down beside me. I pushed him away.

"You have to get on the raft *gently*, Donald," I told him.

He came running again, grabbed the rope, and lowered himself onto the raft, but this time I rolled off.

"What's the matter?" asked Donald.

"I don't know," I said uncomfortably. "I think we have to start with the pygmies and sort of work into it."

We went back to the chase scene through the forest. Donald climbed the box elder and pounded his chest and bellowed. We leaped over the quicksand and over the alligator, and there we were on the raft once more.

This time I got the giggles. Donald did his part perfectly, but just when he got close enough that I could smell his breath—Donald always had a sort of stale bubble gum smell—I rolled off again.

For a whole afternoon we tried it. We added cannibals and burning torches and a gorilla, but somehow I could not get through the kissing. Donald laughed and thought it was a joke, but I was disgusted with myself.

It came to an end very quickly. I decided that I could not have any dinner that evening unless I got through the kissing scene. *This is it,* I thought as we ran through the forest with the gorilla grabbing at our heels. Donald swung around in the box elder yelping and beating his chest. Then the quicksand, the alligator, and the cardboard. Suddenly: "Donald!" came my father's voice from the side window.

Donald rolled one way, and I rolled the other. The next thing I knew my dad had come outside and was standing there in the grass.

"I don't think you should be doing that with Al," said my father. (I'm the only girl in our family, but he still calls me "Al.") "You'd better go home now, Donald, and the next time you come over, think of something better to do."

"Okay," said Donald.

All I did was sit there and stare at my knees. I didn't even tell Dad that the kissing was my idea, so Donald got the blame.

We didn't play Tarzan anymore that summer, and I never did get kissed on the raft. When school started and Donald passed me in the hall, sometimes he'd thump his chest and grin, just to tease me, but for the most part I forgot all about it. He became interested in basketball and I got interested in books, and I probably went through fifth grade without thinking of Donald more than a couple of times.

That same afternoon, however, when I was getting ready to move and I dropped the Crayolas in the sack, I started remembering all the embarrassing

things I had ever done in my life. The mailman might have died and my kindergarten teacher may have passed away, but Donald Sheavers was alive and well.

I began to wish that he wasn't. I didn't really want him to die or anything, just maybe quietly disappear so that the only person left who would remember any of the dumb things I'd ever done would be me. It was bad enough remembering them myself. Exactly one hour later, when I was packing my tinfoil collection, I heard that Donald Sheavers had fallen off his bike and had a brain concussion.

I didn't eat any dinner. I remembered that Donald was Catholic and I thought maybe if I prayed to one of the saints it might help. I thought maybe women saints helped girls and men saints helped boys, but the only saints I could think of were Saints Mary and Bernadette. Then I thought of a Saint Bernard dog. I figured there must be a Saint Bernard, so I sat down in a corner of my room and prayed. I told him that if I had ever let one little wish reach heaven about Donald Sheavers disappearing to please, *please*, disregard it and let Donald live.

"Sure you don't want any supper, Al?" Dad asked, but I said no.

"You worried about Donald Sheavers?"

I nodded. The next day when I didn't come down to breakfast, Dad called Mrs. Sheavers, and she said that Donald was better. In fact, she said, it would be perfectly fine if we went to the hospital to see him, so I bought a Hershey bar and Dad drove me over. I closed my eyes and prayed to Saint Bernard one last time. I thanked him for letting Donald live and asked if he could please fix it so that playing Tarzan back in fourth grade would be erased forever from Donald's mind.

The nurse directed us to room 315, and we went in. Donald was sitting up with a bandage around his forehead, sipping a milk shake. He was still good-looking, even with the bandage. Donald grinned at me, set the milk shake down, and just as I was about to hand him the candy bar, he pounded his chest and gave a Tarzan yell.

I found out later that there are a lot of Saint Bernards, so I figure my prayer just got to heaven and sat around in the dead-letter box.

The movers came the next morning, and we left Takoma Park for Silver Spring, a few miles away. I was glad. I wanted to start a whole new life with different people. But we had only been in the new house five hours and fifteen minutes before I embarrassed my whole family.

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AGNES UNDER THE MATTRESS

WE'VE MOVED THREE TIMES IN MY LIFE, BUT I only remember two times. We moved from Tennessee to Chicago before I was born, from Chicago to Takoma Park, Maryland, when I was six, and from Takoma Park to Silver Spring when I was eleven. I've never had many relatives around. Most of mine are in Tennessee, and we don't visit unless someone dies or gets married or something.

I had an Uncle Charlie who married when he was fifty-seven and died two days later. We'd just driven back to Maryland and had to turn around and go to Tennessee again to bury him. At the funeral dinner there was this sort of weird-looking cake that they called lemon sponge, but I knew it was just leftover wedding cake with sauce on it.

All the McKinleys call each other on Christmas morning, though—the Tennessee contingent calls us in Silver Spring. ("Silver Sprangs," Uncle Howard calls it.) Everybody down there says "Merry Christmas" to everyone up here, which is sort of nice because it means they care about us. Dad says lots of people care about me and I don't even know it; but if you don't know it, I tell him, what's the point?

"Don't you even remember Aunt Sally?" he says. Whenever I try to remember Aunt Sally, though, Dad gets upset.

"Is she the one who used to read me the Little Bear books?" I say.

And Dad says, "Al, that was your *mother*." He takes off his glasses and looks at me hard. "That was your *mother*!" he says again in case I hadn't heard.

Momma died when I was five, and I can only remember bits and pieces; but I mix her up with Aunt Sally, because we lived in Chicago then. Some of the time, in fact, I even mix her up with Sally's husband, Uncle Milt, and that