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## Something About Alice

“01 Looking Hard”

Musical Theme; Feeling the Same Way by Norah Jones

By Drake Koefoed

Alice yanked the 10 wheel dump truck off the highway. She rolled down the window. “Get in, Cowboy.”

Dave got in the truck.

Alice was a pretty but hard looking woman of about 50. She wore Carhartt overalls, Red Wing work boots, and a sweatshirt. “What the hell you doing by the side the road, Cowboy?”

“I got fired from a job on an oil rig, my pickup died, and I was hitchhiking to get to New Mexico where I might maybe have a job if I can eat a lot of crow and remind my old boss that I know pretty well how to drive a cat. I had a ride, but they tossed me out because they wanted gas money.”

She shot out onto the highway, demolishing some prickly pears. “You’re not the first stray cat I’ve picked up. I have a trashed travel trailer you can

sleep in. \$50 a month. I'll find some work for you."

"That's nice of you. Thanks."

"Don't ever thank me. I do things in my own interest. I am as mean as a junkyard dog, and I don't want your respect or your love. I expect you to work for every crust of bread you eat."

"Understood ma'am."

"So you're a cat skinner."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Can you drive this truck?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She pulled over, smashing some more prickly pears, and pushing over a small mesquite. She hopped over him, and pushed him into the driver's seat. "You may use the clutch once. I want to see how fast you can take it to floorboard in fifth."

"Ma'am, that may not be entirely safe."

"It may not. Look for clear traffic and let's see how hard you can push this truck."

Dave looked, and there was nobody coming. He flicked it into first, and slammed the throttle as he let the clutch up, and the truck jumped out of the pears like a rabbit. He let off as the engine topped out, and went

through the gears without using the clutch, putting the pedal to the metal each time, until he had it on the floor, doing about 70.

“Take the Smithfield avenue exit. Go right.”

Dave took the right very hard. The tires howled, and the truck went into a drift. Nobody was coming. Dave turned into the skid, took his wheels back and put it in his lane. “Ma’am, we can’t keep playing with the truck in town. The people in the other lane are not as crazy as us.”

“Slow down, maintain a safe speed, and take the truck to Smithfield rock products, and get us eleven tons of 3/8 pea gravel. Your recklessness says you’re a stunt driver, but your overall calm and control says you are a trucker. I’m betting you’re a trucker. Am I right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, then, lose the ma’am, polite as it is, and start calling me Alice.”

“Yes, Alice.”

They pulled into Smithfield rock products. She went to the office, and came back out. She got in the passenger seat. They loaded the gravel, and went to the job, where Dave spread it, and Alice smoothed it out with a small loader. She parked the loader and got in the truck. “211 North First, James.”

When they got there, he saw it was a private house. They got out of the truck, and went in. She offered him a beer, but he didn't want it. She took her jacket off, and her shoes. She went down a short hall to a bedroom. She ran her foot along the threshold of the bedroom. "This is the Rubicon, Dave. Ordinary employment on that side, and, well, something that may interest you on the other. Now, Dave, it is time for you to decide if you want to cross the Rubicon."

At this point, we must ask the gentle reader if she wishes to hear the details. She may be young and inexperienced, and actually not know what is about to happen. But that is ever so unlikely. Otherwise, she knows Dave will cross the Rubicon, and if she were there, and one of the participants, certainly she would have a nice bit of entertainment. These things pale in influence to your shy author's unwillingness to describe the very private and enjoyable things that happened. So your author asks that you understand what did happen without actually asking such a shy and quiet person to explain them. For your understanding, your shy author thanks you, and if you are a lady, accepts the figurative kiss on the cheek. For the gentleman reader, I would be able to explain it very briefly to your satisfaction, but the ladies are listening, and you know anyway.

\* \* \*

"Dave, did you get what you wanted or are we starting something?"

“We started something.”

The epoxy had hit the catalyst. Alice jumped on him, and wriggled around, trying to reduce the space of a few thousandths of an inch down to the millionths of an inch range, which is what ladies like to do, as the reader surely knows. The metrologist might think this is all silly, and point out what little difference a thousandth of an inch really makes. That metrologist would certainly be male. A female metrologist, or a perceptive male one would understand that those millionths matter, and a little squirming and wriggling is well worth the effort.

At any rate, and of course it could have been due to a lack of metrological advice, our friends did a great deal of hugging, kissing, and caressing, which your author assures you is lots of fun, and very hard to find, in spite of the many huggable kissable and caressible people who do exist.

They came out, and it seemed kind of cold. Alice went to the wood stove. “I want to show you how to run this thing, where everything is.”

Dave came over. She opened the door and used a short shovel to dig out the ashes, and put them in the ash bucket. She took them outside, and dumped them into a screen tray over an oil drum, and shook it a little. She dumped the coals back into the ash bucket, and took it in. She dumped the

coals into the wood stove, and threw in some trash, kindling, and a couple of logs, then put the lid back on.

“So you’re my boyfriend now, Dave?”

“Yes.”

“So we get the rules straight. If you cheat on me, rip me off or beat me up, I will run you over with my truck, put it in reverse, and run you over again. I will not cheat on you, slap you around, or rip you off. What we should do, get your license renewed and get a medical card so you can drive the truck. And you need a couple of pairs of overalls.

“No money.”

“I’ll take care of it. I figure you for a pretty good investment. Don’t prove me wrong.”

They got in a junky Corolla and went to a doctor’s office, where the certificate was issued with little attention to medicine, and a lot to fees and papers. At the DMV there was no problem but the payment. They went to a store that had a lot of work clothes, and Alice bought Dave two pairs of Carhartt overalls, a pair of Red Wing Irish Setter boots, two Pendleton wool shirts, and some underwear and socks. They went to the house and got the truck, to the gravel yard, and the customer’s house. Alice spread another load of gravel and she leveled it out nicely with the loader. They hooked up the trailer, put the loader on the trailer, and took it back to her house, and

Dave took the truck to the quarter wash, and cleaned it. He vacuumed the cab, and got rid of dirt that had been there a long time. He cleaned the engine, and took it to Marie and Alan's used cars, and got the oil changed.

Marie wanted to change the coolant too, and since arguing with Marie was so non productive, Dave let her do it. She showed Dave a little four door Chevy, and called Alice and put the pressure on to sell it to her. Alice gave in at \$800, and they took it to her house. Dave went to the tire shop and moved the tires around on the truck, and put two new ones on steer. He went to the grocery store and bought a bunch of food and some beer, and back to Alice's house.

He put the credit card and receipts on the table, and Alice looked them over. "We've spent lots of money. I hope you're ready to make some tomorrow."

"I suppose."

"I'll start supposing at 0400. We'll meet at lunch, and you can run until around till 2000. We're hauling base rock from Smithfield to a new road out west of 211. You can spread."

"Not as well as you."

"Good enough for the motor grader, though."

"Sure."

"You ever grade?"



“Not very well.”

“God makes grader operators, and he doesn’t make very many. Billy Fox with Cornish Paving is one. And they have Callista James, who can drive anything. Mickey Dain is all right. He’s actually a mechanic. He can rebuild the engine on a bulldozer or a weed eater. Cathrine de Stelle got fired for failing a drug test. Just as well, since I don’t want my boyfriend looking at anything like her, especially in the break in period. She rode in on a sunbeam one day and showed the archangels how to drive a grader in her silk dress and heels. Catty is so good you don’t even notice. Well, Dave, I need the truth. Can you cook?”

“I can bake bread on that wood stove.”

“I can’t imagine how that could be done, but I’ve never seen anyone drift a 10 wheel dumper and get out of it, so I leave that one. We can go out to eat, or if you can really do it, you can make dinner. I do scrambled eggs, macaroni and cheese, and TV dinners.”

“What do you want for dinner?”

“You show me. Let’s go to the grocery store.”

They went, they saw, they purchased. The cost was substantial, but much of it was filling in an infrastructure of a real chef’s kitchen. Alice looked over the wines.

“I do a pretty hard hitting spicy kind of food, so the cabs and such are probably your best bet. If you want beer, look for a bock or porter. If you drink white wine, then you do, but to me, that stuff tastes like paint thinner mixed with apple juice.”

She held up a couple of bottles.

“Both good. Most of the Napa Valley wines are.”

She put them both in the basket. “If I get you drunk, will that help me getting my way with you?”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. You unbutton your shirt, and it’s all over.”

He went off to fuss over the produce, and Alice, who had known a few chefs, stayed clear of that process, looking for the perfect cantaloupe.

A pointless exercise in most grocery stores, because the perfect cantaloupe can be smelled as easily as a fence covered in pink jasmine. Cold storage cantaloupes were cut too green, and never did smell. She looked at the papayas, which had been cut way too green, and brought to the store with no hope of ripening. Why stores in the United States almost never sell a decent papaya is a continuing mystery. Ships can come out of tropical America and be in the U.S. in a few days. Trucks can move the stuff from New Orleans to Minneapolis in a day or two. If America gave a damn, high speed rail could go from Panama to New York. It could be built in six

months, and trains making 200 knots could be bringing the produce that would really help the Latin American nations' economies. You could travel from Tierra del Fuego to Chicago in two days.

"Penny for your thoughts."

"Dave, what if we had high speed rail across the whole country and all the way down to Buenos Aires and up to Fairbanks."

"For about what it cost to bail out the Wall Street Banks from their own greed and stupidity, we could build it."

"Two hundred mile an hour trains like they have in Europe."

"None of the Latin American countries would be against it, because they couldn't afford to be. You would create the most powerful empire the world has imagined, and it would be stable, because nobody would have to be conquered, enslaved, coerced, whatever. It's a wonderful idea, Alice."

"We could do it for less than we spent going to the moon over and over, after we knew for sure that it was just a pile of crap rocks like we're going to haul tomorrow."

"I imagine that is so, and it doesn't matter if you're off by an order of magnitude anyway. You're still right."

"I don't know what an order of magnitude is."

"Ten times. It's just hard science jargon, I guess."

"Did you find the produce you wanted?"

“I never will until they build the Pan American Railway.”

“We’re ready to make dinner with just this?” A cart full of groceries.

“Yeah.”

They went to the checkout counter. Dave carried on. “Instead of oppressing the Arab world over petroleum, we should develop alternate energy. Solar and wind are pretty good, but fusion is what we really need to do. That has been obvious since the 70’s but we don’t have it. This bit of pushing down someone else to get ahead, we have to lose that mentality.”

A guy at the checkout counter snarled. “Sounds like Communism to me.”

“I’m a socialist. Communism was stupid. I never gave a thought to being a Communist.”

“Fucking traitor.”

“Don’t you even think of calling me a traitor, motherfucker! I’ll beat the shit out of you right here and now. Come on now, let’s go for it, you lousy son of a fucking bitch!”

The guy cut and ran.

“Dave! You can’t do that!”

He was breathing deep, shaking. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Alice. It’s PTSD. I never acted like this before the Gulf War. But it doesn’t matter. I’m responsible for keeping the lion in his cage.”

“Shall I ring up your stuff, Ma’am?”

“Yes, please. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“I am not. I’m Polly.” She shook Alice’s hand. “Alice.”

“Alice, I am a psych major at State. If I heard right, you are Dave.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

They shook hands.

“I’m interested in the reactions of people to extreme circumstances.

I’ve studied PTSD, but I never saw it. The guy was an asshole, but your sudden anger, the level of it. I knew that happened, but to see it, wow.

When you are mad, you are one scary dude.”

“I’m a Marine infantry officer. We’re supposed to be scary.”

“Dave, would it be out of line for me to want to interview you?”

“I suppose not.”

“What are you guys doing in about an hour when I get off?”

“Eating dinner.”

“Oh.”

Alice cut in. “Dave, let’s have her over for dinner. I’m sure she can understand that we are not doing disturbing conversation at dinner. Maybe she will even spring for some dark beer.”

“I’m open for that.”

Alice drew Polly a sketch map showing how to get to her house. She wrote the phone number on it, too. “If you get beer, get the heaviest, darkest they have. Dave is a heavy kind of guy. If he has a revolver, you can be sure it’s loaded with .44 mag. His coffee has to be stirred with glass because it’s too strong for metal.”

“I have it, Alice.”

They went home, and Dave went into chef mode. He had to have everything just so. He cut the lettuce exactly this size. He made everything exactly so. When Polly came, he served a salad with nuts on it, bleu cheese dressing, and such. It was great, and the ladies were happy to eat it. There was a spinach quiche. Chicken burritos and pizza. Shrimp in butter sauce. Stuffed jalapenos. Pot stickers. Any need for additional spice was provided in little bowls of sauce that etched the glass they were contained in.

When dinner was done, everyone brought the stuff into the kitchen, and Alice put it all in the dishwasher and ran it. She brought out a bottle of Cuervo Gold, three glasses, and a small ice bucket, actually a cooler of a sort, that you could drink out of if the top was on it.

She went in and out of the room, sometimes leaving just because of the discussion. She had never heard a frank explanation of war. She didn’t

want to be around while Dave calmly spoke of children being incinerated with napalm, and things even worse.

Alice took him outside, where they drank some Cuervo. “I, uh, I don’t think she should hear this stuff, Dave.”

“Neither do I. But she has decided to research it. Little chicks decide to study serial killers. I suppose Polly wants to know what got broken inside Dave to make him change from an ordinary guy into someone who can become a homicidal maniac in 10 seconds. You know about it, and it doesn’t bother you much. Perhaps you know I am less likely than the average man to hurt you, or perhaps you just don’t have much fear. People choose the risks they want to take. Polly thinks of this as a great opportunity to know and talk frankly with the big kitty cat who has had his tail pulled. She is a psychologist.”

“Does that absolve you of responsibility?”

“Certainly not.”

“You’re letting her look right into hell.”

“Pretty much.”

“How can you do that?”

“She wants to see what is in there.”

“That’s it. All of this ethics, everything. She wanted to look into hell so you showed her.”

“Right.”

“Well, I guess we have done this.”

He caught her. “Baby, I didn’t want her to do this, but can you understand what they think? They believe that if they keep looking into this, somehow they will figure out how it happens, how they can take the screaming horrors out of a man and make him back into the guy he should have been. They are looking for the solution, and they know how painful looking at the problem might be. Eric Delacroix paid some pretty rough dues to be a doctor.”

“One of your buddies?”

“Well, Eric got hit by an MG. So I went out for him. I was the company commander. I had to do what nobody else would do. I don’t ask you to understand the Marines, but it was something I had to do. I dragged him in. We sent him back on a chopper. He lived, and became a doctor.

Eric does not ask if you have money before he treats you. He will get out of a chopper and go down a cliff to help someone he does not know. He helps people, no questions asked. Polly is like that. She wants to solve this problem at any price. She knows learning about it is going to give her nightmares for the rest of her life, and she is willing to take that. She asked me to help, and I could no more refuse that than I could sit and watch Eric bleed out.”



“OK, let’s go back in, and I will understand.”

They went back in. Polly looked at him for some sign that something had gone wrong. He resumed answering her questions about things nobody should know about.

They ground to a stop when she asked, “Do you think anyone goes through this experience and does not suffer from PTSD?”

“Yes.”

“And in your opinion, are those people sociopaths?”

“Some, not all. There are people who take that stress and do not get PTSD. It used to be that we said a few people got shell shock, whatever. Now we say there may be a few who do not.”

“I understand. I think there is someone in specific you are thinking of.”

“Yes.”

“Can I meet him?”

“Maybe.”

“Dave, what are you doing?”

“Helping with her research.”

“And you are going to introduce this lady to a serious badass?”

“A very serious badass.”

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