

L'IL ALICE

Brenda Black

I was serving the coconut cake when my mother-in-law Kiddo announced in her high pitched, little-girl voice that she had a new story to tell us about "L'il Alice." A chorus of mimicking "L'il Alice" sounds went around the table with Kiddo laughing the most. She was short, child-size and fun loving, always exuding a kid-like manner, very much like Betty White of the "Golden Girls". Also like Betty, Kiddo could be astonishingly naïve. She called her little dog L'il Alice, with lilt to her L's. L'il Alice was a tiny, ill-tempered, dirty mop-water excuse of a dog that Kiddo treated like a favorite child. Of course most of us hated L'il Alice.

Kiddo and her husband Black spent their idiosyncratic lives on farms in close connection to many animals. They befriended a succession of real dogs - shepherds, bulldogs, mongrels - all kept outside. When the last of the big dogs died, Kiddo's hairdresser Rosalee had given her this tiny Cairn Terrier. To everyone's astonishment, Alice became a house dog. She lay like a cat in Kiddo's lap, and slept on the foot of her bed. Kiddo cooked hamburger for her, and almost set a place at the table. Alice guarded her new position in life by growling and barking at everyone, including family. She had a wiry coat that made petting painful.

Black and Kiddo had come by after church, starving as usual, and happy to have a cooked meal waiting. It was just the four of us now, parents and grandparents, with children grown and gone. But missing young people didn't keep the funny stories from rolling and everyone laughing between bites, as was the custom at our family dinners. I sat down in my chair and gave Kiddo full attention; from the sparkle in her eyes, I could tell this was going to be good.

Kiddo took a small bite of cake, put down her fork, and began. "Well, last night L'il Alice kept wanting outside to do her business. She kept jumping on and off the bed, then running to the front door and barking. I was afraid she would wake up Black (of course almost nothing wakes him up!). I got up and to go downstairs and let her out, then she'd bark to get back in. She just wouldn't settle down. I wasn't getting any sleep and I got pretty mad at her. I scolded her, pushed her down on the bed and I said, 'L'il Alice, you stop this foolishness and stay put.'

"Well, I got a couple hours of sleep, then she started up again, barking at the front door. I went down, let her outside, and told her she wasn't getting back in this time. Finally I got back to sleep, but then L'il Alice started up with her barking again. This time Black woke up, and said he was getting ready to kill that stupid little dog.

"I knew I had to do something. I told him I would take care of it, to stay in bed. I could hear L'il Alice out back, barking like mad. I figured it was those stray cats prowling around, riling her up. So, I went down the stairs and out the back door in my bare feet. Of course I just had on my little shorty gown, you know. Well, things got real quiet when I opened the door, no barking at all. I called out whisper-like, so Black wouldn't hear, 'L'il Alice, L'il Alice, where are you, come to mama, come-come, come-come', but she wouldn't come to me. I couldn't see her anywhere, so I stepped on out into the yard. The moon was bright and full, and I could see pretty good. Then all of a sudden, I spied her. There she was, not doing anything, just walking along, all nonchalant, by the rock wall.

"I ran over and picked her up, tucked her up under my arm, and gave her several swats on her behind. 'L'il Alice, what in the cat hair has got into you?'

"Just then, she turned her head up to me, and hissed: 'Hiss, hisssss.' This ugly pink nose was staring up at me. Mercy! I had grabbed up and spanked a POSSUM!"

Kiddo broke out in her high-pitched cackle, and we all joined her. "Well, he felt like L'il Alice. His coat was wiry like hers."

"What did you do?" we asked on cue.

"I said 'Shoo', and flung the fool thing down. I ran one way and he lit out the other, that naked tail straight out behind him. L'il Alice chased him into the woods, barking the whole way. Then she ran back to me, so proud of herself, like 'Humph, we showed him.' Then we marched right back upstairs and went straight to bed after that, didn't even wake up Black. L'il Alice didn't have anything else to say the whole rest of the night."

Another round of "L'il Alice" mimics erupted, as we burst into laughter. Kiddo may have been naïve, and Little Alice may have been a brat, but they really did make the perfect fearless pair. Kiddo's peculiar voice, the sparkle in her cool blue eyes, and her zest for fun lent magic to the telling.

My husband passed his plate for seconds. "Okay, who can top Kiddo Spanking the Possum?"

We all began talking at once as the coconut cake slowly disappeared.