

Alice's Story: A Search for Light

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Alice's Story: A Search for Light

Mary Taylor Martof

Prologue

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This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Ev'ry where I go, I'm gonna let it shine,
Ev'ry where I go, I'm gonna let it shine,
Ev'ry where I go, I'm gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Tears welled in Alice's eyes and began a path down both cheeks as she sang out with the rest of the congregation, tapping time to the music on the pew in front of her. If I had found that light early on, I wouldn't have needed the drugs and alcohol to fill the emptiness inside and cope with life. But how was I to know the light was there? No one else had ever seen it.

New Orleans, Louisiana, 1948

Fear shone in the eyes of eleven-year-old Alice Hollister as she looked about the small living room for her baseball bat. It would protect her until she got to her bedroom where she could lock and bar the door. She could not find the bat, but her eyes were smarting from the heavy scent of alcohol in the room.

Her mother, Belle, had picked up a stranger from Grande Isle in a local bar and brought him home. Belle had just staggered into the master bedroom of the little shotgun house to change into 'something more comfortable', leaving the man to ogle Alice. He had a strange look on his face when he said, "I done had me a girl about your age—sweet little thing." His voice trailed off as he slicked back his long, black hair.

He bore a striking resemblance to pictures Alice had seen of Jean Lafitte. Probably a descendent of the gentleman pirate, she thought, most folks from Grande Isle are. He even called himself Jean. Was it a namesake? His eyes, so dark one might call them black, held a danger that had probably attracted her mother, but horrified Alice. A bushy mustache and a scar cutting diagonally across his cheek added to his mystique. A more pleasant expression might have made him appear handsome, but the constant scowl gave his face an ominous foreboding. She felt those eyes penetrating her blouse and caressing the pink nipples beneath.

Belle stepped out of her bedroom, dressed in lounging pajamas that were slit to the thighs on the sides, exposing her shapely legs. She was a beauty with long black hair, high cheekbones, sensuous red lips and flashing black eyes to match those of Jean. Her low-cut top bared plenty of cleavage and bronze skin—skin so bronze that some claimed she was sure to have black blood in her family tree.

Flipping her luxurious black hair back, Belle glanced at Alice, a disdainful look on her face. The child wondered if her mother thought that she was actually flirting with Jean. I'd rather walk on razor blades, thought Alice.

The child finally reached her bedroom door, opened it and quietly slipped inside. Bolting the door, she grabbed a heavy chair she kept for occasions like this, which happened quite frequently. She jammed the chair under the doorknob as extra assurance that no one could open the door.

Suddenly realizing that she had to use the bathroom, she thought Oh, no. Wild alligators could not force me to open that door again. What to do? Placing her index finger against her chin, she looked about the bedroom. Finally, she climbed reluctantly up on the windowsill, stuck her small bottom out the window, and peed. Hope no one saw me.

Deciding to sleep in the clothes she was wearing, she reached for Teddy, her favorite stuffed animal. The fur on his belly was missing in spots from her constant rubbing when she felt anxious, but the spots made him even more lovable to her. The child hugged him to her chest and whispered in the dark, "What should I do, Teddy? What if that stranger took a notion to rob and kill us? I heard on the radio where Sam Spade, my favorite detective, breaks down doors all the time. Could that pirate man break mine down? The chair might not hold. That man looked awfully strong to me. And what about Belle? Would she protect me? Sometimes I think she'd be happier without a big, ugly kid like me around. After all, she pitches a fit if I call her anything but Belle—probably wants folks to think I'm her little sister."

She frowned thoughtfully, "I need to have a little talk with Dad, for sure this time. I've waited this long because I didn't know what would happen if I did. But you can bet that whatever happens will be my fault. And Dad won't be here to take up for me."

She hung her head as she thought: But Belle's not all bad. Sometimes she's even nice—like the way she treated Fannie, the Bag Lady. Why I've seen old Fannie many times on the streets of New Orleans--always in rags, the number of layers depending on the outside temperature, always wheeling that shopping cart. Guess it contains all her possessions.

Belle, Pirate Man, and I ran into her on our way home tonight. Belle walked right up to Fannie like she knew her. Handed her a bill. Old Fannie smiled and said, "Praise the Lord for you, Miss, you always helps old Fannie." When Pirate Man sneered and said that the old hag would just spend it on booze, Belle stood up as straight as she could and replied that she did not care as long as it made Old Fannie happy.

The child rubbed the teddy bear's stomach, whispering, "Maybe if I wait a little longer, things will work out. Just wish she would show more of that kindness to me, instead of criticizing everything I do. If I wash dishes, she says I didn't get them clean. My room is never straight or clean enough to please her. Why once I made pancakes for her breakfast, and she threw them in the garbage—saying, I didn't wash my hands first. Makes me feel like I can't do anything right, Teddy."

Her eyes turned upward as she said, "If I didn't have my dad and my teachers to praise me once in a while, don't know what I would do. Just go around feeling miserable all the time, I guess. And never know why. I think Belle resents having a kid to take care of."

Alice paused, wrinkling her brow and clenching her right hand into a fist. She did not understand why but clenching that right fist seemed to fill her with the strength she needed to rise above her circumstances.

Turning back to Teddy, Alice said, "No, no excuses, this time. Things have gone too far. Dad needs to know what goes on around here when he's away."

The house was quiet—too quiet. Alice put Teddy down and crept to the door. Placing her ear against it, she listened but heard nothing.

She was about to open the door a crack when she remembered another night like this. That other night, she had actually opened that door and made her way stealthily out and into the living room. Two nearly full wine glasses had been sitting on the coffee table in front of the white leather couch. She had picked up the one with lipstick and sipped. It tickled her nose and made her cough, but she liked the taste. And besides, it made her feel good. She covered her mouth with a towel and went over to peek through the partly open door to Belle's bedroom. No one had noticed, so she took another sip and before long another. She felt like she was floating on clouds and sailing on a gigantic rainbow. Looking down, she saw the Bengal-tiger rug at her feet move. Or was it the room? Suddenly, her tummy felt funny, and nausea was clutching at her throat. She clapped her hand over her mouth and ran for the bathroom, arriving just in time to spew her partially-digested supper into the commode. The taste and smell of puke made her even more nauseous.

The day after, she had been too sick to go to school. And school was the highlight of her life. Alice had decided then and there that she would not try that again.

Tonight, she just checked the chair barring the door again and walked back across the floor in her bare feet. Climbing into bed and under the covers, she reached for Teddy. Holding this precious gift from her dad closer, she whispered in the darkened silence, "Unless I talk with Dad, you're the only one I can tell family secrets to, Teddy. Other people might not understand and think I was a bad person." With one eye on the door, she rocked the bear back and forth, until she fell into a restless sleep.

She was awakened by the sound of glass shattering. The noise had come from the living room. Lying very still, she was afraid to move. Stealing a glance at the window, she saw that it was still dark outside with a sliver of moonlight creeping across her bed.

A male voice was shouting, "Where's the money, Tramp? I know you got it stashed away. I know that excuse for a man o' yours makes plenty on that oil rig."

There was no answer. Alice wondered whether Belle had passed out, been knocked out, or worse. Then came the sound of drawers being opened and slammed shut. The child pulled the covers over her head, slinking down beneath their warm comfort. But the shivers started anyway—they started at the bottom of her spine and worked their way up to her shoulders. She reached for Teddy but couldn't find him. Much too rattled to think clearly, she remained in her paralyzed position and waited.

Am I imagining things, or is that someone outside my door. I'm pretty sure I heard a noise. Can't tell what it was. She strained her ears and soon discovered that she had not imagined it: There was no doubt. Someone was at her bedroom door. The doorknob rattled. And then it shook more forcefully. She couldn't imagine being more terrified but soon discovered that the nightmare got worse when the door began to vibrate. She couldn't breathe. Just as she was sure that she was turning blue, the noise ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Did the chair hold, or did I dream all that? Silence filled the darkness. A gunshot rang out.

Chapter 2: Belle Hollister

What seemed like hours later, the police arrived, and Alice knew that it was safe to leave her room. Opening the door, she sniffed the strong aroma of Luzianne coffee. Belle was making coffee in the small kitchen. She had thrown a terrycloth robe over her revealing outfit and twisted her hair into an upswing. A uniformed policeman stood in the hallway surveying the damage.

The house looked like a hurricane had blown through. Empty drawers were strewn all over, their contents spewed out like debris left by the passing storm. Furniture and vases sat upside down next to bare kitchen cabinets over a floor covered with beans, sugar, rice, and flour.

The policeman made his way around all the debris and sat down at the kitchen table, taking a notepad from an inner pocket. Belle sat across from him, her feet planted demurely on the floor. "I shot at him, but he got away," she was saying. His eyes narrowed as he studied her. Then focusing on the overturned bottle of champagne, he commented, "Looks like someone was celebrating," He was watching her face as he said this.

Belle did not meet his eyes but remained focused on her hands as she replied in her most innocent voice, "Oh, yes, I had some friends in earlier this evening. So if I sound a little fuzzy, it's because I had a little too much champagne."

The policeman made a note on his pad. Then levelling his gaze on her, he said in an authoritative voice, "Wanna tell me exactly what happened?" He was still watching her face.

"Well, as I said, me and some friends was celebrating a recent birthday. I might have had a little too much to drink 'cause I got awfully sleepy about eleven. They left, and I went to bed."

"Let me get this straight. They left before you went to bed, right?" Belle nodded.

"I must have left the door unlocked 'cause that's how he got in." She walked over to the stove and picked up the pot of coffee. "Would you like a cup of coffee, Officer?"

He nodded, so she took a mug from the cupboard and poured the rich, brown liquid in it. "Sugar is on the table. Would you like some cream?"

"Black is fine. Thank you." He took a sip and said, "Good coffee."

Belle nodded, as she placed a strand of hair back into her upsweep.

The policeman turned around and saw Alice standing in the doorway.

"Where was the child?"

"Asleep in her room, weren't you, Alice?" Belle crossed her arms and gave Alice a steely look that told the child she'd better keep her mouth shut.

The policeman also saw the look, "I'll just let her speak for herself, if you don't mind, ma'am."

Alice placed her hands behind her so that he would not see them shake and just nodded, too afraid to say anything. No telling what Belle would do to her when he left. It would be better to wait and tell her dad.

I've got to hand it to her, Belle can lie with the best of them, thought Alice. At the same time, the child couldn't help but feel grateful for protection during the night. Had Belle intended to protect her? She didn't know. Still shocked by what Belle had done, Alice had not been aware that a gun was in the house. This woman, so critical of everything Alice did but unable to see her own faults, might do anything.

Chapter 3: Tom Hollister

The following morning Alice was awakened by the ringing of church bells and knew that it was Sunday. Are there voices coming from the kitchen? She stuck her head out from under the covers and strained her ears, soon recognizing the low, booming voice of her dad. Stuffed animals and covers went flying as she jumped onto the cool, hardwood floor, tripping over the school books she had dropped there on Friday. Not bothering to don robe or slippers, she made a beeline for the kitchen. And there he was—spooning the rich, chicory-laden coffee into the pot. When he turned and saw Alice, his whole face lit up. He grabbed her and lifted her small body high in the air before clasping her close to his chest. She wrapped both arms around his neck, rocking back and forth.

Tom Hollister was six feet, 3 inches tall and weighed 185 pounds. His lean body was all muscle. Handsome in a rugged sort of way, he stayed tan most of the year from his work on the oil rigs—work he had done since the age of 19, first in his native Texas and later in Louisiana where he had met Belle. He was a man who had the respect of his coworkers and most who knew him—all except those who had borne the brunt of his explosive temper, a temper he had never lost with his precious Alice. Alice thought he was perfect and wondered why her Grandma Hollister was always saying, "You just ain't no good unless you got some temper in you."

He sat her down on a stool saying with a grin, "I thought I heard the patter of small feet, and look who showed up. A little beauty with red hair and pretty freckles."

Alice wiggled her toes, "Do you really think my freckles are pretty, Daddy? The kids at school tease me all the time, saying the cow blew bran in my face."

He straightened his broad shoulders, feigning surprise, "What you talkin' bout, cher? Everyone of 'em is a beauty mark."

Alice glanced sideways at her mother before saying, "Belle thinks I'm a redheaded, freckle-faced ugly duckling."

"That's all in your head, Alice," Belle mumbled. She frowned as she adjusted the heat under the deep fryer to 360 degrees. "This deep fryer should be ready by the time the beignets are."

Alice tightened her lips. Looking at Belle, she said, "Well how come every time I visit your family, they laugh and want to know what tree stump you found me under?"

Tom patted his daughter on the head, saying, "Why, honey, only the prettiest of fairies and angels like you are found under tree stumps. Didn't you know that?"

Alice smiled. "You always make me feel like I'm the best, Daddy. Sure hope you're right." She glanced at Belle, who busied herself checking the temperature of the deep fryer for a second time.

Alice remained perched on the stool where her father had placed her, toying with the silverware on the counter. Tom put the coffee on the open flame to boil and turned to his daughter, "Your mother was telling me about the robbery last night. Were you scared?"

Belle interrupted by saying, "I told you I took care of it, Tom." She gave Alice a riveting look. Alice knew what that look meant. And she'd better not make any waves.

Tom said firmly, "The child needs to express her feelings, Belle."

Alice looked from Belle to her father, the color draining from her face. Her lips trembled but nothing came out. Tom looked at his daughter and changed the subject. There'd be time later, when they were alone. Tension in the room was palpable, so Tom turned on the radio. Zydeco music filled the air, soothing Alice's soul. For some unknown reason, it always seemed to affect her that way. Calmly, she pulled her pink flannel nightgown over her knees and looked at her dad for a clue as to how they should proceed. He obliged with a question, "How's school, Alice?"

"Oh, Daddy, it's great. One day Sister had a microscope, and we got to look at a very common Diptera under it."

"A what?"

Alice laughed, "A fly, Daddy."

"Alice, you're very smart. If you work hard in school, I'm willing to bet you can become anything you want to be."

"Made all A's on my report card again. Sister thinks I should be able to get into medical school one day."

"Will that make you happy, Alice?"

"Oh yes. I want more than anything to be a doctor so I can help others."

"Well, just keep working hard, and your old dad will do his best to see that you get there."

Alice hopped down from her stool and went out to the small porch to retrieve the Sunday newspaper. Returning, she spread it out on the kitchen table and began searching for the comic strips. "I'm glad you got here to read the funnies with me, Daddy; they're not half as much fun without you. Let's read Peanuts first. He's my favorite."

Tom pointed to the comic strip. "Look at Snoopy with sunglasses, ain't that a blast?"

Alice smiled. "Who's your favorite character, Dad?"

"No question about that, sunshine, Dick Tracey is my man."

Belle was removing the chilled dough from the refrigerator and placing it on a floured board on the counter. Searching through several drawers, she finally located her rolling pin. Then, all of her attention was focused on rolling the dough out exactly 1/8th of an inch. Cutting the dough into 2 1/2 inch squares provided further distraction. She then carefully picked up each square and dropped it into the hot oil. Turning back to the refrigerator, she reached in and pulled out a box of confectioner's sugar. She poured the sugar carefully into a plastic bag. Keeping an eye on the frying beignets, she pulled each of them out as soon as it reached a golden brown. The hot beignet was inserted into the bag, and the bag was shaken until it was covered with the light, sweet sugar.

Alice watched her out of the corner of her eye, wondering whether her concentration on the beignets kept her from being with the family. She's lost in her own world. I wonder if she can even see the truth around her.

Belle placed the beignets on a platter, saying, "Better eat these while they're hot." Brushing back her long, black hair, she left a trace of flour as a highlight.

Alice had cafe au lait while the adults swilled the luscious Louisiana coffee they were addicted to. Everything made better by the hot beignets. Belle looked at Alice critically, "Wipe your mouth, Alice; you have a white mustache." Filled with shame because she couldn't even eat beignets correctly, Alice obeyed her mother.

"Oh, leave her alone, Belle. She looks cute"

Alice stopped twisting her hair and gave her dad a big grin.

From outward appearances, they were like dozens of other Louisiana families enjoying a peaceful Sunday morning together. Only the tremor in Belle's cup, fear in the eyes of her child, and tension in Tom's muscles belied the idyllic family scene.

Alice had not finished her hot drink before Belle was ushering her out of the room, "I'll clean up. Alice, go to your room and get some clothes on. You'll be whooping and coughing next week," She said this as she adjusted her apron and turned the water on full force to rinse the cup in her hand.

She's afraid I'll tell Dad the truth. She's always doing things to keep us apart. Alice went to her room and quickly donned a pair of jeans and a white blouse. When she went outside to look for her bike, Tom was waiting for her on the porch steps.

"Leave the bike, Al. Let's walk along the levee," he said, as he took her by the hand.

Alice's other hand went into her mouth, and she started chewing on her nails. The moment she had been dreading but, at the same time, hoping for had arrived. She had to tell her dad the truth.

When they reached the levee, he stared into the distance, not meeting her eyes. "I've heard Belle's side of the story, Alice. Now I'd like to hear yours."

Alice told him everything, the truth rushing out like water from a broken dam. Then turning and seeing his face, she frantically wished that she had chewed on her words instead of her nails. His mouth was drawn in a straight line as taut as the skin over his white knuckles. The lines on his forehead had deepened as he smacked one of his fists into the other. The furrow between his eyebrows combined with the crinkles around his eyes to give him an ominous look. He was about to explode. She had no road map to tell her how to act or what to say because she had never before seen this stranger standing beside her.

After what seemed like an eternity, her legs could move. Staring straight ahead, she turned around and started toward home, not knowing what else to do. But Tom stopped her saying, "No, Alice, I want you to go to your friend Cecile's house and stay there until you hear from me. Do not go home. Do you understand?"

Alice was dazed, "But can't I get my bike?"

"I'll bring your bike to you. Just stay here until I get back with it."

Alice sat down on the levee, dazed and confused. Her whole life had been turned upside down. She had no compass to guide her, not even knowing whether she could trust this stranger walking away from her. She watched him with fear and a perplexed look on her face. She watched until he disappeared around the curve—his broad shoulders drooping, his gait slow and painful, like that of an old man. But he was all she had.

It was a while before he returned with the bike in tow saying, "I called Mrs. Guidry. They'll be more than happy to have you stay with Cecile for a day or two." Pointing to the small suitcase in the basket on the handle bars, he said, "I brought you some clothes and a key to the house in case you should need something in there. But I don't want you to go back to that house unless you absolutely have to. You hear me, Alice?" She nodded.

Then he walked away, the broad shoulders by now taut and defiant against a world that had betrayed his dreams. She watched him until she could no longer see him through her tears.

Chapter 4: The Quarter

Alice, Cecile and Mrs. Guidry sat on the levee, waiting for the ferry that would take them across the Mississippi to the French Quarter, that most famous part of New Orleans, known the world over as 'The Quarter.' Alice guessed that Mrs. Guidry had planned the trip to distract her from her problems at home.

Sniffing the jasmine blossoms in the warm, October breeze, Alice felt better already. The silence surrounding them was broken only by the squawking of an occasional sea gull and music from a calliope. This music machine was calling tourists for a ride on the steamboat that would churn the

muddy river to mix the blueness under the shadows with the shimmering yellow left by the late afternoon sun. It was almost impossible to visit the French Quarter and stay sad. The spirit of the place engulfed everyone who went there with a carefree attitude that sang out, "Laissez les bon temps rouler (Let the good times roll.)"

Serious and studious, Alice didn't want to waste her time on frivolous things, preferring instead activities that would help her become a doctor, a person so important that others wouldn't look down on her. She pulled on her favorite strand of straight, bobbed hair and said shyly, "I want to go to the old slave market first."

Cecile frowned and said, "Oh, Ally, that ain't no fun."

Alice flipped her hand playfully at her friend. "Sure it is. What could be more fun than seeing how things were long ago and learning history?"

Mrs. Guidry raised her eyebrows at Alice. "Wouldn't you rather go to one of the more cheerful places, cher? How about listening to jazz at the Cafe Du Monde?"

"Maybe later we can have lemonade at the Cafe Du Monde. But we are studying about the slave market in school now. I'd rather go there first to see what it's like today."

Mrs. Guidry gave a big sigh and said, "Well, if that will make you happy, cher, we'll go to the slave market first." She paused before continuing, "But only if we go to Cafe du Monde afterward for cold drinks and jazz."

Then with a more serious expression, she continued, "Actually, it was right here in Algiers that the ships unloaded their human cargo of slaves so long ago."

Alice looked at her. "But the market is across the river."

"True. But they were kept here in high-walled pens with their entire families until healthy enough for sale. Can you imagine the sight of their bleeding sores where the shackles gripped their ankles as they walked in the Louisiana heat?"

Alice peered through the fine mist covering the water, "I don't have to do much imagining; the vision still lingers."

Mrs. Guidry turned up her nose adding, "Yes, and the humid winds still carry a trace of the stench from human waste mixed with the smell of bacon."

"Bacon? Come on, Mere. How did the bacon get in there?" exclaimed Cecile.

"The bacon was used to fatten them for sale."

Alice grimaced. "Sometimes I can hear the moaning and wailing of the fourteen-year-old girl Sister told us about. I hear the sounds in the echo of the palm trees as they blow in the wind."

"What else did Sister say about the fourteen-year-old girl?" asked Mrs. Guidry.

"She was moaning and wailing as she was being torn from the arms of her family to be sold on the market for about \$550.00."

Cecile looked intrigued in spite of herself. "How did they ever survive all that?"

Mrs. Guidry folded her hands in her lap and said thoughtfully, "Well, they had each other and their religion, voodoo, which they brought with them from Africa. Some say pockets of voodoo are still in this city today."

"There's the ferry," exclaimed Cecile. "You can have your facts, Ally. I'm ready for some fun in the Quarter. You hear that saxophone in the distance. You see them tourists swaying to and fro in time to the calliope." With that, she kicked up her heels and danced her way onto the ferry. But the ride to the Quarter was not conducive to dancing: the boat rocked from the rough waters of the Mississippi.

Chapter 5: Kat Trahan

"Folks keep asking me how old I is. Ain't nobody's business. I don't even know myself. I knows that I was born sometimes after the War 'tween da states, the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, and I got the gift. "The old woman twitched her nose, adding another wrinkle to the others on her ancient face. Her long, white, stringy hair fell forward on her face, leaving a small space for the dim eyes to look out on a faded world that had long since passed her by. She was rocking in her dilapidated chair and daydreaming about the past.

The years melted away. Once again she was young and beautiful with tawny skin, long black hair and matching black eyes. She could no longer see the dust and cobwebs in her one-room shack. She was stepping barefooted onto the rich, cool soil of Bayou St. John. The sound of the drums and tambourines surrounded her, working the other dancers into a frenzy. But she was a priestess of voodoo; her movements were slow and calculated.

As the rhythm picked up its tempo, a tall, muscular African male, wearing only a loin cloth, handed her a box. She reached into the box, and the head of a snake emerged. The snake wound its body around her arm, across her shoulders and down her back until its full twelve feet of mud-colored and spotted roundness had emerged. "Come, le petit Zombie, let's us dance for yo' namesake, Zombie, snake of the great Marie Laveau," she uttered aloud.

The drums, tambourines, and dancers quickened the beat as snake and voodoo priestess became one in a slithering, enchanted movement that made it impossible to separate woman from snake. "Come, spirits of the dead. Come you who been to that Great River, you who has crossed over and you who is still waitin' to cross. You walks among us, the living, today and sees all our troubles in a light that only the dead can see. Give us yo' wisdom. Come to us. Come to us." She remembered those words as if it were yesterday she had spoken them.

The daily newspaper had written about the rituals, calling them "uncontrolled orgies" and "devil worship." She had read the words and muttered, "What does they know?"

"Meow." She was brought back to reality by Minuit, her black cat. She reached out and stroked the cat's back. "Where you been, Minuit? Did you bring me some more spiders?" The cat purred and rubbed against her outstretched hand. "I was gittin ready to get up from here and make somethin' for us to sell and git us some money. Them spiders will make a good addition to my so-called 'hex,' which some fool with less sense then money will pay for."

She pulled several spiders from the cat's fur and dropped them into a bright red canister next to a makeshift table, made from two pieces of lumber and two sawhorses. Reaching in a drawer behind her, the old woman pulled out a small kitchen cleaver, useful for chopping meat. On the makeshift table something was wiggling. Chop! The cleaver came down on the critter, and part of it flew off

to a corner of the room. It was the head of a snake. She ignored it and continued chopping until the length of the wiggling form was in pieces. She pulled a sausage grinder from her cupboard and carefully placed the pieces in it, adding the spiders from the canister. Squinting and looking about, she limped over to pick up the severed head with its jaws still snapping. The head went into the grinder with the other parts.

She then turned the handle until a small portion of the gruesome mixture oozed through the outlet openings and into the red canister. It was all camouflaged with flour, oatmeal, several spices, and powder from an old rusted tin. The mixture was carefully stirred with water and placed in the oven as she muttered unintelligible words over it. The heat of the oven made the room smell like the bowels of hell itself had opened up.

Oddly enough, when the canister emerged 20 minutes later, it looked the same. It was a hideously bright red with a large yellow eye in the center of its front side. The eye had a dilated black pupil with orange snakes winding around each other.

Chapter 6: The Storm

Mrs. Guidry dropped onto her easy chair, exhausted from their trip to the Quarter. "You girls wore me out today. I gotta rest a bit." She kicked off her shoes and rubbed her bare feet before elevating them on an ottoman. "Tomorrow's a school day. Is the homework done, Cecile?" She paused. "I know Alice did hers—don't even have to ask."

Cecile pulled herself erect and looked her mother in the eye, "I did mine, too, Mere. Alice is no better than I am."

Her mother smiled. "No better, cher. Just different."

Mrs. G. wiggled her toes to get the circulation going, "Now, go lay out your clothes for tomorrow and take your baths. I don't want to have to tell you twice." She looked at her daughter. "You hear me, Cecile." Alice obediently got up and started for the bedroom. Cecile frowned and put her guitar back into its case.

Her mother sighed. After a brief respite, she arose and went into the kitchen." Removing some cold, vegetable soup from the icebox, she put it in a saucepan and placed it on the stove. As she opened the bread box to remove a loaf of French bread, she turned to see Alice enter the kitchen.

With a sheepish look on her face, Alice said, "My dad forgot to pack my uniform blouse. What should I do?"

"Can you wear one of Cecile's?"

"It's too big, and Sister will give me a demerit for my uniform."

The lady gave a big sigh, turning up the palms of her hands. "Well, we don't want you getting demerits, do we?" She paused before saying, "First, we'll have an early supper, and then we'll just have to go over to your house to get you a blouse; you must have it for school tomorrow." She placed the bread in a basket and covered it with a towel before returning to the icebox for fresh butter.

Alice rubbed her hands together, hoping to find a way to ease the lady's burden. "Cile and I can ride our bikes over there."

Mrs. G. returned to the stove to check the soup, saying firmly, "No, I am going with you."

Alice lowered her eyes, "Sorry I'm so much trouble, Mrs. Guidry."

"No trouble, cher. Just lay out everything else, and take your bath."

"Cile has the bathroom right now. Okay with you if I take mine when we get back?"

Mrs. G. squared her shoulders, "Suit yourself, cher."

"May I help you with supper?"

The lady smiled, "Napkins are in that middle cabinet. Soup bowls are just above them. I'll get the silverware."

Cecile entered the room toweling her wet hair and sat down at the table. "I'll just have bread and cheese," she said as she tore off a large piece of the fresh, French bread.

Her mother filled her bowl with the hot soup and looked at her daughter, "Eat."

Alice poured glasses of milk for Cecile and herself from a frosted pitcher on the table, placed a napkin in her lap, and dug into her meal. The broth and barely cooked vegetables tasted so good.

As Mrs. Guidry buttered a piece of the crusty bread, she turned to Cecile, "That wind is picking up out there. Hear it? Go turn on the radio, cher. Let's hear the weather report."

A jingle for the latest detergent was soon interrupted by an announcer from the Weather Bureau in New Orleans. "Looks like that area of disturbance in the Gulf of Mexico is turning into a hurricane. That would make it Hurricane Charlie with winds of 78 miles per hour; Charlie is predicted to move east of New Orleans and reach Biloxi, Mississippi about dawn."

Mrs. Guidry sighed with relief, "Sounds like Charlie will miss us, so if we hurry, we can get over to your house, grab some blouses and get back before the remnants of that storm hit. But there's no time to waste. Can't tell what those hurricanes will do. I've known them to make a u turn and head in the opposite direction. Let's finish our supper when we get back." They scraped their chairs back and left the unfinished meal on the table. Cecile grabbed a hunk of bread and cheese before heading out the door.

The winds had continued to pick up by the time they reached the little, shotgun house. Mrs. Guidry swept the hair from her face and turned to Alice. Looks to me like the house is empty. Any radios in there? We better get another weather report."

"There's one in the master bedroom. I'll get it first thing." Bracing against the wind, Alice carefully placed her key in the door and opened it. She stuck her head in and called out. But no one answered. Everything looked the same as it had when she left to go for a bike ride. Dishes were still in the drainer just as Belle had left them. Otherwise, the house looked a mess—just as it always did. Disappearing into the master bedroom, she soon reappeared, saying, "Couldn't find

the radio. Belle must have taken it with her."

Mrs. Guidry frowned. "I'll just look around the kitchen and rest of the house, if you don't mind."

"Help yourself, Mrs. G. I'll grab a few blouses, and we'll be out of here in no time." She went to her room and began searching through her closet for a blouse but found none. A pile of dirty clothes on the floor of the closet were searched with no better results. I know I've got some blouses here somewhere. But where? She went to the laundry room and found another pile of dirty clothes by the washing machine. This pile yielded better results. She grabbed several blouses and was looking for something to stuff them in when she was distracted by Cecile's voice coming from the living room. "What is that? Ugliest thing I ever saw."

Alice rushed in to see her friend pulling something out of the trash can. It was a flyer of some sort like the ones used for advertising products for sale. On the front of the flyer was the picture of a hideously bright red canister. Not just any canister. It had a large yellow eye painted on it. In the center of the eye was a dilated black pupil with two orange snakes coiled around each other.

Mrs. Guidry pointed a finger at her daughter, "Cecile Guidry, you got no business mucking around in other people's trash."

"But this ain't no ordinary trash, Mere. It's an ad for a hex. I'd be willing to bet on it. I better go outside and take a look around, just in case." Her voice trailed off as she opened the front door.

Alice looked at the flyer and shrugged her shoulders, "No idea how that monstrosity got in our trash." Then she walked into the kitchen, where she found a pile of paper bags. She took one and stuffed several dirty blouses into it.

Carrying the bag into the living room, she lowered her eyes before addressing her friend's mother, "May I use your washing machine when we get to your house, Mrs. Guidry? The only blouses I could find are dirty. She took a deep breath and added, "I'm so sorry to cause you so much trouble."

"I'll do them for you, cher, you need your s...." Her sentence was interrupted by a scream from outside. They both ran to the door. A blast of wind hit them in the face, knocking some old- dirty dishes from the table in the hallway. Broken glass mixed with dried food cluttered the hallway.

Cecile lay at the bottom of the steps, holding her ankle and rocking back and forth.

Her mother helped her up, supporting the side with the injured ankle. "Have you tried standing on it, 'Cile?"

"I tried, but it hurts too...." She broke off, heaving heavy sobs.

"Hold on. We'll think of something." Alice and Mrs. G. looked at each other, concern etched on both of their faces. "There's no way we can get back to our house if you can't stand on that ankle. Guess we better get you inside out of this wind and try to figure out what to do. Maybe if you rest it a while, and I wrap it good and tight, we could make it home."

"Alice you get on one side. I'll take the other. "Cecile, can you put your bottom on the step and use your arms to pull yourself up to the next one? Alice and I will help you." Taking what seemed like an eternity, they moved up the four steps so that Cecile could sit on the porch. Her helpers stopped to rest and take a deep breath. Then each grabbed an elbow and placed their arms around her back. In this way, they were able to get her into the house and on the couch.

"Let me take a look at that ankle." Mrs. G. gently placed the ankle on a nearby ottoman for elevation. "Can you move your toes?" Cecile wiggled all five.

Alice came into the room carrying an elastic bandage. "I found this in our medicine cabinet."

"Good girl, Alice." Mrs. G. took the bandage and expertly wrapped the swollen ankle, using a figure eight. "Remember the word RICE, girls. It will help you treat any injury:

R stands for rest.

I means ice. It is used until the swelling is gone.

C is for coil. Wrap it snugly—but not too tight.

E means elevation."

"Oh woe is me! Why did this have to happen?" Cecile wailed. "I was just trying to make sure we had not been hexed."

A loud noise came from the front porch. Alice opened a crack in the door to peer out. The wind had blown the metal container for milk delivery into the yard. A low rumbling howl had begun.

Mrs. Guidry started to wring her hands but stopped abruptly, changing her facial expression into a quiet calm. The calm appeared to move slowly down her body and permeate her entire being. "We must be getting the tail end of that storm in the Gulf. It's not safe to go out there right now." Her face took on a look of resignation. "Alice, round up all of the flashlights you can find. I'd say we could lose power any minute." She looked about, "Is there a way to shutter these windows?"

"The shutters are outside in the garage."

"Too late to get those and put them in place now. We'll just have to do the best we can with what we have in here." She looked around. "Alice, can you help me move that wardrobe over to cover the dining room window? That seems to be where the wind is hitting hardest." Luckily the large wardrobe in the hallway had rollers, so the two of them were able to maneuver it up against the window.

Alice left the room and soon returned holding four flashlights and a head band with a light attached. Mrs. Guidry placed the head band on her head and gave each of the girls a flashlight, keeping an extra one for herself.

The wind was now howling like an angry god and blowing rain against the window. The tapping sound of the rain brought some comfort. "Well, at least the window is still intact," sighed Mrs. G. She checked the front door, shining her head light on it for a clearer view. Rain was coming in through the cracks surrounding the door. "But thank the good Lord! It's not coming under the door yet." She turned to her frightened wards. Cecile was crying, her whole body rocking back and forth with sobs. Alice felt sorry for her but at the same time a bit angry that she could not help.

Mrs. Guidry found two mops in the kitchen closet. Handing one to Alice, she began mopping water wherever it appeared. "Stay away from those windows, Alice. They could shatter at any minute."

"Oh woe is me! Please protect us, our Lady of Mercy," exclaimed Cecile as she searched in her pockets for her rosary beads.

"You can pray for us, 'Cile, while we do all we can. God expects us to use the brains He gave us to do all we can for ourselves, and He will be with us," her mother said as she made the sign of the cross.

Alice went into the kitchen to see if more rain was being blown in from that direction. The kitchen was dry for the time being, but that could change at any moment. Cecile's voice could be heard, repeating the rosary over and over.

"Alice, how do we get into the attic?" asked Mrs. G., her eyes glued to the bottom of the front door. "Looks like that storm changed course and headed for us."

Alice put down her mop and went closer, whispering, "You're worried about the storm surge and flooding, aren't you?"

"That and all the water coming through the cracks," Mrs. Guidry softly replied."

Together, they found a pull-down staircase to the attic next to the pantry in the kitchen, just as the overhead lights began to flicker. "Stay calm, girls, we're about to lose power." Alice thought the lady was doing a pretty good job of doing that for herself.

Just then, the lights went out, leaving them in total darkness, where only the howling winds and beating rain could be heard. Alice walked over and hugged Cecile to her chest. "It'll be okay, 'Cile." The action helped Alice calm her own fears.

She returned to help Mrs. G. pull the staircase down. They climbed by flashlight into the humid, hot attic and huddled briefly near the entrance. "We'll have to find a way to get Cecile up here."

"Maybe she'll be able to put a little weight on that ankle after your fine treatment."

"Let's hope so."

They climbed back down and found Cecile swinging the light from her flashlight around the room. "Save the batteries in that flashlight, 'Cile. We may need them."

Just then the kitchen window blew out. The howling wind hurled broken glass around the room.

"Leave it, Alice, you'll cut yourself. Besides, getting Cecile into the attic is our first concern."

She carefully made her way through the darkness to her daughter. "Cecile, can you try standing on that ankle? Alice will be on one side, and I'll be on the other. We'll keep as much pressure off of it as possible."

They helped her to the attic stairs, Cecile moaning every step. "You're doing great, cher. Now, you need to climb these steps. Let your arms do the work. I'll be right behind you keeping the weight off of that ankle." After struggling for what seemed like hours, Cecile heaved herself onto the attic floor. The attic was vibrating in the howling wind.

"It's hot and scary up here. Besides it smells like mold."

"Cecile, get ahold of yourself. We're all scared, you know." Mrs. G. directed her light down the steps to check on the level of water on the floor. "Looks like the floor is barely covered, so we should be okay here for a while. That window we covered must have been blown out, too." Grabbing another flashlight from Alice, she used it and her head light to search out the attic. "Alice, how do we get onto the roof?"

"Guess we'll have to cut a hole through. I don't know of any other way."

"Oh, Laws! We gotta climb on that roof?" cried Cecile. I knew a girl in school; she drowned after her and her family waited on their roof for days."

"You're not helping, 'Cile, so shut up!"

"Thank you, Alice, Now tell me where I'll find an ax or a hatchet to cut our way through to the roof."

"Dad keeps several tools on the floor of the pantry."

"Okay! It may take me a little more time to find what we need. Cecile, where are your rosary beads?"

"In my pocket."

"Use them." She turned and started down the steps.

Cecile clasped her rosary to her chest, "Hail, Mary, full of grace," She was stopped by the sound of a gigantic crash in the rear of the house. Alice guessed that the old oak tree out back had just been uprooted. They looked for it to come through the roof, but, oddly enough, the structure remained intact.

Cecile's teeth were chattering, so Alice placed her arm about her and held her close. They rocked back and forth, searching the darkness for Mrs. Guidry's flash of light.

Alice started singing, "Abide with Me."

Cecile joined in with "Fast falls the eventide...." They harmonized, and it helped calm them for a while.

"I'm guessing we're not close to the eye of the storm,"

"How do you know, Ally?"

"Well, we'll get a period of extra fury sent by the wall of the eye, followed by silence. The eye of the storm is silent."

"Shh! Right now I'm more concerned about that noise over in the corner, Ally."

"Shh-hh, 'Cile. It'll be okay." Alice thought of the rats her dad had once found in the attic but kept her mouth shut.

"Alice, I know something is moving across the floor. I can feel it. It's a rat, ain't it?"

"You still have your shoes on 'Cile?"

"I got shoes, Ally, but I have other parts uncovered."

Alice said nothing. She could see the dim light from Mrs. Guidry's head light as the lady ascended the stairs.

"Oh! Thank the good Lord—you're back," cried 'Cile.

"I found an axe, but no saw. This will have to do."

"You gonna chop through to the roof with that axe, Mere?"

"If we have to, Cecile. But that's not necessary yet. There's no water coming under the front door. The floor is covered but seems to be holding steady for now. I'll keep watching."

"What do we do after you cut through the roof?" Cecile's voice was shaking.

"Well, child, we climb up there and try to attract attention from somebody in a boat. Do either of you have a white handkerchief or anything that would attract attention?"

"I have a white blouse on, Mrs. G."

"We may have to use it, Alice."

"Ain't there snakes in that water? I seen pictures of floods—they slithering things are everywhere." Cecile shuddered.

"Cecile, go back to your rosary; you're letting fear take control of you. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Water was now coming through cracks in the wall of the attic. Mrs. Guidry removed her dress and started mopping.

"Should we try the axe now?" Alice tried to keep the panic from her voice.

"We can wait a few more minutes." Mrs. G. was reluctant to let more water in through the roof.

Something hit the front of the house with such force that Alice wondered whether the little house would stand. Then came the sound of shattering glass. The attic vibrated with more force. The wind howled. Total darkness. More flying debris hit the house from time to time as the endless night went on and on.

After the wall of the eye passed, the wind began gradually losing its force, and only the rain could be heard, beating on the roof. When this continued for what seemed like forever, Mrs. G. decided that it was safe enough to leave the attic and look for beds. By then, Cecile was able to put more weight on her ankle and got down the steps with the help of her mother and Alice.

The kitchen clock gave the time as 5:14 a.m. Alice limped about, trying to get the cramps out of her legs. The beds stood in about two inches of water. They were covered with oil cloths from the kitchen table and nearby closet. Alice fell onto the oil cloth. She was exhausted mentally and physically. Sleep had been waiting for her. It grabbed her whole body in an instant. Cecile and her mother slept in Belle's bed.

Chapter 7: After the Storm

Alice awoke and sat up in bed. The oil cloth beneath her was stiff and stuck to her skin. Although it was cloudy outside, she knew it was late. How in the world did I sleep so soundly on this thing? I must have been really exhausted. Opening her eyes wider, she looked about as familiar objects in her room gradually came into focus. She looked for Teddy before realizing that she had left him at Cecile's house. She still wore the jeans and white shirt she had put on so long ago. Was it only yesterday? The outfit was still damp in places. The terror of the night before came rushing in, arousing her into a fully conscious state, and she wondered what damage had been done. Peeking out the window, she saw a landscape she hardly recognized.

She stepped out into the damp, overcast New Orleans morning, attempting to smooth her wrinkled shirt as she searched for anything that looked familiar. The sharp, fresh smell of ozone filled the hot, humid air. Rapidly flowing water was pushing trash and debris in the flooded street in front of the house. Black silt covered everything else, and insects were swarming from the silt, as if they had been hatched there. Broken limbs were everywhere. A tree in her neighbor's yard lay on its side, its roots naked in a mound of mud that had once held it in place. The scene, so familiar to her for a lifetime, now took on a haunted mien. Even the sweet-olive bush and the nearby orange blossoms were covered in silt, their fragrances smothered by the acrid smell of gas fumes and the smell of dead fish. She braced herself to descend the steps of the porch and check on her favorite oak tree in the backyard, the one that had held her tire swing.

Placing one hand on the railing for support, she started down the steps, one at a time. Suddenly, she stopped. "What is that?" Sucking in her breath, she gazed at the bottom step, as ice crystals crept up her spine. *

In the French Quarter of New Orleans, 32-year-old Alice Hollister faces her father's ghost in a voodoo séance and learns secrets that will change the life of this defrocked nurse forever. When a child, Alice's alcoholic mother told her repeatedly that she was defective. Still in her childhood when her father died in an oil-well explosion, Alice had no one to tell her, "I see your little light, and it's just precious." So she is unaware of the light in her soul and survives by pleasing others. Her life is filled with pain. Not realizing that she has created much of it herself, by replacing a search for identity with people pleasing, Alice turns to alcohol and eventually cocaine for relief. She steals drugs from her employer and becomes defrocked from nursing. Prostitution appears to be the only way to support her addictions. But a phoenix, a bird with magical powers, turns her life around. She retraces certain paths she has taken and finds that evasive inner light leading to her authentic self.

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