

**Dear Alice**

*Hey!!! We're having a little get-together on the lake tonight. It's to celebrate our last free month before we have to go back to school!! And it's summer, so you can't say you're doing homework this time! I haven't seen you in ages, so you better not miss it. It's at 8. Bring your swimsuit, or don't, but you're going swimming either way. Luv u!!!!—Lani*

Alice lived alone.

She was just sixteen years old, but she felt much older.

She had always lived alone, as far as she knew. Her world was her bedroom and the only thing she knew.

It wasn't lonely.

The floor was white-washed hardwood, the walls were cream, and the ceiling sloped down to one side so you had to bow your head if you stood in the east corner. There were two doors, but she only ever used one; that one being the door to a small bathroom that was reminiscent of a country house. The other door led somewhere else entirely, maybe off the world, but Alice didn't know. Everything she needed was in the room, so she never had any desire to leave.

The room was brightly lit by a large bay window on one side, where she would often sit to read and catch a floating breeze. In the morning when the air seemed shadowy in the corners of the room, the window let in a sweet sunny smell from outside. Little insects that had snuck between the window panes would find an escape in those quiet hours.

The day was calm and she was alone. It was a good day.

BOY DROWNED AT LAKESIDE PARTY: 19-year-old drowning victim was pronounced dead Monday after what is being called "a tragic accident" at a high school party.

While swimming with friends in a private lake after dark, Matthias Glover was reportedly caught off guard by a prank by one of the other teens and was submerged for a few seconds before resurfacing, unconscious. Jacob Glover, the boy's father, says he "wasn't a very strong swimmer". Emergency officials received a call at 10:11 p.m. and Glover was pronounced dead on the scene. Authorities are investigating claims of negligence, but police have released a statement that Glover's family will not press charges.

*Are you ok? —Paige*

On sunny days Alice would sit in the window-seat with her legs tucked underneath her and just think.

Sometimes she would just imagine that she was a piece of glass, and the sunlight was shining right through her and reflecting in tiny rainbows all around her. She imagined floating on the ocean, letting the cool water and the soft warm light drift over her skin.

*Alice, what's going on? You haven't been seen in, like, a week. People are asking questions. They're doing an investigation and everything. Lani's not doing really well. She's super mad at you. She was already jealous that you went off alone together, and then that happened. She won't listen to anyone and says it's all your fault. She's been awful, honestly. I think she feels really guilty because she tackled him and everything. Can't you just talk to her so we can get this nightmare over with? Anyway, I'll see you at school tomorrow, if you show up. <3 Steph*

*Dear Alice, Please come out. It's weird at school right now. Everyone's talking about you and it's weird because you're my sister. Love from Paige*

Out on the window ledge was a flower box where Alice grew violets. She loved their vivid, soft petals and the sweet fragrance of their dark leaves. She would press them flat between the cream-white pages of an old leather diary, or she would let the petals dry in the sun and put them under her pillow for sweeter dreams. Every one was a treasure that she cherished, a dull purple jewel or a memento from God.

*Sweetie, your teachers have been calling. They're starting to worry about you, and I am too. Don't you want to talk about anything? We're here for you, whatever you need. -mom*

*i cant believe u have the nerve to act like ur the one hurt from this? to just sit at home and feel sorry for yourself? I thought u were my friend. I thought u were his friend. —Lani*

The door in the room was intriguing to Alice. It was an old, black door with black hinges and a tarnished silver doorknob. Its formidable simplicity seemed to mock her when she thought to open it and see what lay on the other side; the hinges creaked loudly in laughter and the brazen black panelling was a face yawning open to swallow her into the unknown. Still, it evoked a burning curiosity in its quiet grandeur, and even though she knew she would never exit her tiny white room, she ached to know the world just beyond the door.

*— Hi Alice. It's Mrs. Jacobs. I noticed you haven't been at school for a while. I just wanted to call and see if you're doing ok. Your mom called last night and said you're still upset about Matt. If you're up to it, maybe you could come into the counseling office and just talk about how you feel. In the meantime, I'm going to send your homework with your sister so you won't get behind. If you have any questions, you can call me. Get better soon. Bye —*

*Dear Alice, Everyone's still asking about you. I have to tell them you're just sad. I wish you'd just talk to me. Mom says people grieve differently, but I thought maybe I could help you, if you just would talk to me. We're sisters. We're supposed to trust each other.*

*We had a lockdown for a police dog to search our stuff. He was sooo cute! We were stuck there for like 3 hours. Mr. DaFoe spilled bleach on himself by accident and by the end of it there was this white splatter on the front of his shirt. You should have seen it. Marie told me Lani got in trouble for something, but I don't know what. Anyway, I love you. Mom's got meatloaf in so I have to help with the dishes. Love from Paige*

Certain days were louder than others. The room was alive, breathing with her, the silence

pulsing against her ears in a frantically undulating march.

*This is all ur fault, you know. He'd still be here if it weren't for you. ur worse than a murderer. Because of you, he's gone. FOREVER. i hate you. It was bad enough you tried to steal him from me, but now you stole him from everybody. How can u live with yourself? —Lani*

*Al, you're going to have to go to school tomorrow. This thing you're doing, I don't know if it's for sympathy or what, but it's gone on too long. You have to toughen up and face the world. You're a strong girl. I know you can do it. Dad.*

She was afraid. Not always, but sometimes. Times when the sun went down behind the clouds and left a strange shadowy feeling over the whole room, or when the wind whistled in from outside with foreign smells, she began to feel a little colder and less welcome in her room. It was lonely, watching the light fade from the wallpaper, and she would start to write down short poems — little memories — and her eyes would shine and her heart would start to beat very quickly in rhythm with the nighttime. Her heart seemed to swell up like a gale over the sea and she'd fall asleep with a soft inescapable terror in her chest.

*To Miss Alice King: You have been absent from your classes for four (4) weeks and three (3) days. A meeting between your parents and the administration is requested. Reminder that Blanche High School has a strict attendance policy and any unexcused absence will be reported to a truancy officer.*

*Regards,*

*Lance Renton, Principal*

*Alice, you can either go to school tomorrow or you can count yourself out of camping next summer. I don't want a run-in with no officer or whatnot. Someone's got to put their foot down. Dad.*

Day came with a stagnant, sour feeling. Alice never knew how long she'd been sleeping, and sometimes she worried she'd been lying there for years and years. The sheets would start to feel like something stored in the attic too long, and the whole room seemed to be faded and peeling. She would examine every inch of her face, looking for signs of time passing on without her; it seemed like a

thousand million years had passed in her room and would pass before she left it. But the green-specked mirror in the corner never showed any change in the picture between its carved wooden edges, and so she would carry her sheets to the window to make them fresh and new and white again.

*Alice, don't forget to put out your laundry so I can wash it. We're having spaghetti tonight. I'll set you a place if you want to come down.—mom*

*Dad's mad at you. I wouldn't come down tonight. Love from Paige*

Evening again. When did twilight come so quickly?

Some memories, she didn't want to have. She wrote them down to get them away from her, and let them out the window where they couldn't hurt her anymore.

Today was quiet.

*Listen, Alice. I'm your best friend, so you know this is with your best interest in mind that I say this. I know this has been super tough for you and all, but it's starting to get weird that you don't talk to anyone. You're making it hard for everyone to move on by being so caught up on it. Maybe because you saw it happen, you think it hurt you the most, but that's not true. Everyone lost somebody that day. And if you're trying to make everyone feel guilty, just stop. You need to move on like the rest of us. <3 Steph*

She wanted to forget.

Everything reminded her — the softness of the bed, the whispering moonlight, the expanse of white floor. All of it reminded her that she was alone.



*Dear Alice,*

*Hello from Tampa! The kids are having a blast. Uncle Jason says to say hi from him.*

*So, kiddo. What's up? Your mom's been calling me up like crazy lately. She's worried about you.*

*She says you haven't been out of your room in a few MONTHS! You have to work through what's making you like this. I work in a really great office over in Wyoming. I'm going to send you their psychiatrist's business card. I think it'll be good for you to talk to someone who didn't see the situation happen, an impartial observer, because I know in a small town other people's ideas make it hard to move on. He's not cheap, and it's far away, but he might be able to do a phone consultation so we can get you back on the right track.*

*Hang in there, sweetie. We'll get through this, I*

*promise. Love,*

*Aunt Carol*

*Alice, please — Paige misses you. Just respond to her notes at least, ok?-mom*

The big, white desk against the wall was covered in paper. Torn diary pages, crumpled-up poetry, little doodles of midday wonderings, all piled across the smooth wood. The pile grew every day. Sometimes Alice felt like her brain was leaking and she needed to write down what she thought, and her hand would scurry, mouselike, across page after page after page — and the next day she would find the pages and she was afraid. She was afraid of what she did without thinking and afraid of remembering what made her write those things down. She feared the thoughts that came to her at night, the thoughts that felt like she was swallowing water; her lungs were filling and her heart was full to bursting — falling asleep was like drifting in the ocean and she was out beyond where the spotlights reach.

Then day came again with the smell of death and Alice wasn't afraid.

**Dr. Samuel H. West, MD/Psychiatrist**

**Phone: (616) 438-9924**

**3680 Cratchitt Drive, Fallasburg, MI 49442**

**Hours are from 11:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday—Thursday. Appointment only.**

Alice's hair used to smell like sugar. She noticed this when she brushed it. She would wake up with cobwebs in her hair from the corners near her bed and she would brush them out and think of sweet things, things that reminded her of her mother or hot summer days. Now her hair was dusty and had the same stale smell of the morning, no matter how she washed it. It was a dead, dry smell, like old seaweed.

*You're still locking yourself away from your problems, huh? News flash, honey bunches. The world doesn't get any easier. You want to just sit there and hide from the world for the rest of your life, that's your choice. But the rest of us have to deal with the consequences of your actions.*

*You deserve to die. Enjoy your guilt. —Lani*

Yesterday Alice chose solitude. Today she would decide again. Piece by piece, she began to leave the room.

She began to write.

*Dear Alice,*

*Hi! Thanks for your letter. You can just call me Sam. I'm really sorry to hear about your friend.*

*Do you want to talk about him, or just about anything? I'm okay with letters. It's not what I usually do, but if it helps you, that's fine with me, and I already talked to your mom about it.*

*We'll be like pen pals! You'll have to bear with my handwriting, though. I was never any good at penmanship.*

*I'll look forward to your next letter!*

*Your friend,*

*Sam West*

Alice stepped out of her bedroom into the light of the hall window. The world was bigger to her now.

The stairs were deep and dark and the floor was cold. Something seemed different about the air here; everything was vibrant and colorful, piercing through the old murky feeling with startling clarity.

She was sixteen years old, but she felt much younger.

She took the first step. It was morning.