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What She Left

Written by T. R. Richmond

Published by Michael Joseph

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What She Left

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MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

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UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

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Penguin Random House UK

First published 2015
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Set in 13.5/16 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–17936–6
TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–17937–3

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Visit the blog of Professor Jeremy Cooke at
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and let your own investigation unfold.

Dedication in *What She Left* by Professor J. F. H. Cooke, published September 2013

To Alice Salmon (7 July 1986–5 February 2012) and Felicity Cooke (16 October 1951–).

Without the former, this book would have been nothing; without the latter, so would I.

Prologue

Article in the Arts Council magazine, *The Operative Word*, 2001

What's in a name? That's the question we asked teenagers to answer in 1,000 words for this year's New Talent competition. Here's the winning entry from fifteen-year-old Alice Salmon.

My name is Alice.

I could leave it there. I know what I mean by that. I'm me, Alice Salmon. Tall, average-looking, big feet, hair that goes wavy at the mere mention of water, a bit of a worry bear. A massive music fan, a proper bookworm, loves being outdoors, though dies at the sight of a spider.

Mostly it's Alice people call me, although occasionally I'm Al or Aly or Lissa, the last one of which for the record I hate. When I was a kid I used to have squillions of nicknames like Ali Baba and Ice and, my favourite of all, especially when my dad called me it, Ace.

My uncle calls me Celia, which is an anagram of Alice, although I get the word 'anagram' muddled up with 'anachronism'. 'That's what I am,' my dad always says if anyone says 'anachronism', although the word 'dad' is actually a palindrome. I learnt that yesterday.

I like knowing this stuff, even if my best friend Megan says I sound as if I've swallowed a dictionary. It's not that I like showing off, but you've got to if you're going to study English. If I get the grades, I'd love to go to Exeter or Liverpool, but as long as it's

a long way from Corby I don't mind, although wherever you go there are probably people trying to get away from *there*. I'll be honest, I can't wait to move out; my mum's constantly poking her nose into my business. She reckons it's because she cares, but it's not fair it's me who suffers because she's paranoid. I obviously put that last line in after she read this and she'll never see it because I'm bound not to win.

Maybe what's in my name is the music I like (have listened to 'Dancing in the Moonlight' about 400 times today) or the TV I watch (you're looking at the world's biggest *Dawson* fan) or my friends or the diary I keep? Maybe it's the bits of all of that stuff I can remember, which isn't much because my memory's lousy.

Perhaps it's my family? My mum and dad and brother who used to called me 'a lice' or 'Mice' or 'Malice' as if it was the funniest joke ever cracked in the history of the world. Maybe it'll be my kids, not that I'm going to have any, no thank you: all that yuck and puke and poo. I haven't even got a boyfriend, although if Mr DiCaprio is reading this, I am free on Friday . . .

'You'll change your mind,' Mum says about the babies, but she said that about asparagus and I haven't.

Perhaps it's the things I plan to do, like travel, or the nicest thing I've already done, which hands down was that day's volunteering at the deaf place (can you see my halo shining?) or possibly the worst (no way am I fessing up to that!).

I could tell you about my best day ever. That's a toughie, maybe it was when Meg and I went to see Enrique Iglesias or I met J. K. Rowling or my gramps took me on that surprise birthday picnic, but the thing about 'ever' is that it only takes you up to now, and tomorrow can be better so I ought to talk about 'so far' rather than 'ever'.

There again, sometimes you can explain what an object is by pretending not to talk about it (I've just googled that, it's 'apophasis') so maybe what's in my name are the things I could be doing

instead of this, like my maths homework or taking Mr Woof for a walk.

I used to wish more famous people were called Alice. Not, like, *mega* famous because then whenever anyone said it, it would be them who everyone thought of – like if you're called Britney or Cherie – but semi famous. There's Alice Cooper but he's a man and that's not even his real name. There's *Alice in Wonderland*, too, which used to get quoted at me a lot, stuff like being curiouser and curiouser, though my favourite line was always the one about not being able to explain yourself because it's not actually yourself you see, even if I never understood it.

I suppose I am what I'm writing here, too, which might be rubbish. I asked my mum to read this – only to check the spelling – and she said it was great, even if the first and last lines did make me sound like an alcoholic, but that's just how she interpreted it.

Mum said there were a few bits I should reconsider, but there's no point submitting it if it's lies, although I did agree to knock out the text speak and swear words and there were lots of them in the first draft (this is the seventh!). I also use too many brackets and exclamation marks but they're staying in, otherwise (again) this wouldn't be me.

'At times it terrifies me how much we are alike,' Mum said after she read it. Well, she's not the only one. Some days, even though she tries to hide it, she mopes around the house like the world's about to end. (Yes, this line went in after she vetted it, too – talk about the thought police!)

Dad reckons I must have been dropped on my head as a baby, because me and him have hardly anything in common, although we both love salmon, which is funny because you could say that makes us cannibals.

My name is Alice Salmon. Five words out of my 1,000. I hope I'm more than 200 times those five words. Even if not now, I hope one day I will be.

I will finish this now and stand up and ask myself who I am. I do that a lot. I'll look in the mirror. Reassure myself, scare myself, like myself, hate myself.

My name is Alice Salmon.

PART I

Something passing stopped

Southampton StudentNet online forum, 5 February 2012

Topic: Accident

Anyone know what's going on down by the river? Police and ambulances all over the place.

Posted by Simon A, 08.07 a.m.

It's true. Place crawling with cops. Johnny R's out rowing and reckons the whole bank's sealed off.

Posted by Ash, 08.41 a.m.

Hope there hasn't been an accident. That weir has always been a deathtrap. Uni should have fenced it off properly years ago. Dog drowned there only last month.

Posted by Clare Bear, 08.48 a.m.

Deathtrap maybe, but you'd have to be messing around or pretty damn unlucky to fall in the water over those railings.

Posted by Woodsy, 09.20 a.m.

It's a homeless bloke apparently.

Posted by Rebecca the biologist, 09.54 a.m.

Says on Twitter it was some lad on a stag do climbing the bridge for a bet. Hit his head on the way down so was unconscious. I used to fish that bit of the river . . . It's bitterly cold in winter. Few seconds in there

and you'd have hypothermia, no question. The currents are crazy. You'd be swept out into deep water unless you're a mega strong swimmer.

Posted by Graeme, 10.14 a.m.

Used to be suicide hotspot that bridge. Seriously.

Posted by 1992, 10.20 a.m.

You bunch of coffin-chasers ought to zip it – imagine how their family would feel reading this shite.

Posted by Jacko, 10.40 a.m.

Their family are hardly going to be on here are they? Only saddos like you and me, Jacko, who don't have a real life!

Posted by Mazda Man, 10.51 a.m.

My brother's a fireman and he reckons it was an ex-student – girl called Alice Samson.

Posted by Gap Year Globetrotter, 10.58 a.m.

Was a girl in my brother's year called Alice *Salmon*. Top lass by all accounts.

Posted by Harriet Stevens, 11.15 a.m.

Lots of Alice Salmons on Facebook. Only one seems to have been at uni here. Nothing new on her wall since yesterday afternoon when she wrote 'Can't wait for night out tonight in Flames'. Was she still living in Southampton then?

Posted by KatiePerryfan, 12.01 p.m.

OMG. Just been told about Alice Salmon. Didn't even know her and devastated. She didn't have kids did she? Please someone tell me this ISN'T true.

Posted by Orphan Annie, 12.49 p.m.

Police literally swarming area now. Why so many? Was it not an accident?

Posted by Simon A, 13.05 p.m.

Afternoon, all. I was in her year if it is 'the' Alice Salmon. She lived in Portswood then Polygon in her final year. She works in the media in London, although she never struck me as a 'midjya' type.

Posted by Gareth1, 13.23 p.m.

Alice the Fish, we called her! Can't believe this is true. What about a Facebook tribute page?

Posted by Eddie, 13.52 p.m.

Aren't fish supposed to be able to swim?

Posted by Smithy, 13.57 p.m.

F**k off Smithy, this isn't the time. Tw*t.

Posted by Linz, 13.58 p.m.

Wasn't she dating some bloke from Soton? She was the one with the freckles, right? Wore a lot of hats?

Posted by Not so plain jane, 14.09 p.m.

The university will put out an official statement on this subject shortly so until then it's inappropriate for this site to host any comments and I am suspending this thread forthwith.

Posted by StudentNet Forum Administrator, 14.26 p.m.

Letter sent by Professor Jeremy Cooke,
6 February 2012

My dear Larry,

I overheard the news. *Overheard* it, can you believe, in the SCR of all places. You overhear that one of your colleagues has had a minor prang in their new car or that Tesco are planning a new superstore on the ring road or that your MP has lost his seat in a by-election, but not a death.

It was this morning and I was engrossed in *The Times* crossword. 'Christian name for a code, nine letters,' I muttered. 'Seven down.'

No one responded. I had the purgatory of three hours of lectures with first years in prospect. Around me, conversations carried on as before.

'What about that dead former student then?' Harris piped up. Silence while everyone waited on his next proclamation. The little upstart always knew how to work an audience. 'It was all over the TV yesterday. Drowned in the river.'

It had passed me by. There again, I often can't bring myself to watch the news; so much of it is uninformed, sensationalist rubbish and so depressingly predictable. I thought evolution was supposed to make us more civilized. Besides, I'd been double-digging the garden.

'*Points South* reckons she was a strong swimmer, too,' someone chipped in.

'Yes, but *Points South* also reckons global warming isn't happening!' someone else replied.

Nothing like a death to spark some life into the SCR conversation. I wondered if they'd react similarly when I go.

'I used to teach her,' one of the English lot said. 'It was the Salmon girl.'

I felt my grasp on the newspaper weaken. Oh God. Not Alice. No, not Alice, please, anyone but my Alice.

'Very keen on Plath – predictably,' she added. 'Nice girl. Bright.'

More voices. A dog walker spotted her; thought she was a bin bag initially. One theory gaining credence was that she was on a hen weekend and a few of them had been fooling around in a dinghy.

'The Alice Salmon who left in 2007?' I enquired as nonchalantly as I could.

'The very one,' Harris said.

'Alice, Alice, who the fuck is Alice?' one of the postgrads laughed, clearly an in-joke.

This doesn't concern you, Jeremy, I told myself. *Not any more. Concentrate on the crossword. Go and teach that bovine-like herd of freshers about cross-cultural diversity in kin relationships. Go to your hospital appointment, then go home and cook that bass.* Trouble was, Larry, an image of Alice had lodged in my brain. I tried to picture her serene and at rest, as Ophelia in Millais' painting, floating face-up, her dress dancing in the eddies and whorls. Except the River Dane isn't the clear cool spring of John Everett Millais' imagination; it's dirty and treacherous and full of debris and rats. In the time it took me to not manage another three crossword clues – I used to finish it over a cup of coffee, but I appear to be losing information these days – she'd become a different person to the one I remembered: now she played tennis at county level, had a real temper on her and spoke French, spoke it like a native. None of it true as far as I was concerned.

'By all accounts, she was quite a hottie,' one of the new chaps said.

'For Chrissake,' I blurted out, 'listen to yourselves, you're like vultures.'

'Don't give yourself a heart attack, old boy,' he quipped.

Someone quoted the gag about how your hair and fingernails carry on growing after you die but the phone calls taper off, which sent the conversation off on a tangent: the health service and Leveson, the latest round of pay negotiations, the situation in Syria. I remembered her graduation. It didn't raise any eyebrows, me attending. Why would it? I was a respected member of the faculty. Part of the establishment; one of the fixtures and fittings. I merely went to wish the class of 2007 bon voyage; to see them safely off into the big wide world. I'd stood quietly at the back – my epitaph, if ever there was one – and watched Alice, all grown up and leaving. She looked exquisite in a mortar board and gown. I would have loved to have seen her mother there, too, but either I missed her or she avoided me. Elizabeth. The *poor* woman. How would she have heard the news? Presumably from the police; surely they'd have gone to her house, rather than telephoning. God knows what it would do to her; she was a fragile soul at the best of times. I remembered what she looked like when she cried. Her mother, I'm talking about now, Larry, not Alice. The peculiar machinery of her grief: the way her face changed shape, the way her whole body did. I dropped the paper. Felt close to tears and I can't have cried for twenty-five years.

'Endeavour,' Harris called across the room. 'Christian name for a code. *Endeavour* – it was Inspector Morse's first name.'

He was right. The smart-arse, he was right.

Apologies for unburdening on you again, Larry, but you're the one person with whom I can be honest. Merely taking out my pen (a handwritten letter, what lovely dinosaurs we are) and beginning with my standard salutation

brings so much comfort. There's no need for formalities, no withholding, I can truly be myself. I appreciate I don't need to ask you to refrain from mentioning this to anyone, as there will inevitably be repercussions at this end.

She didn't deserve to die, Larry.

Yours as ever,
Jeremy

Alice Salmon's Twitter biography,
8 November 2011

> Occasional tweeter, frequent shopper. Opinions (mostly) my own. Handle with care. If found, return to sender. Meanwhile, mine's a skinny frothy latte . . .

Extract from Alice Salmon's diary,
6 August 2004, age 18

Wish I had normal parents.

Mum even barged into my room earlier and plonked herself down on the bed to have a go at me. 'How are you feeling?' she asked.

The last thing I needed was a lecture. The room was all wobbly. 'Stop being a control freak,' I told her.

'I'm only concerned.'

I love her loads but if she loved me as much as she claims then she'd give me a break. She simply can't bear to see me have a good time.