

Last Words

By Sophie Castro

The stool tops at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary visiting area are octagons. Built by former inmates, and balancing atop steel beams welded to the concrete floor, their varnish is new, dark brown, and sleek. Alice runs her fingers along the wood grain, wondering if the stools on the opposite side of the glass are as pretty as these.

“I’ve been trying to think of my last words.”

Across from Alice, behind the barred window, Richard Hall sits with the pale plastic phone pressed against his ear. The beard he’d been growing over the past 12 years is shaved now, showing off his pale skin, pocked with acne scars and new pimples.

“Do you have any ideas?”

...

Alice Redding started writing to Richard in the second trimester of her third pregnancy, through a program she found while at her mother-in-law's church. Though she wasn't a religious woman, Alice liked the masses for the one hour of free daycare, the weekly escape from the confines of 211 Westbury Rd, and the pictures sculpted into the stained glass windows.

When she first heard of the ‘Death Row Support Project,’ it didn't feel real to her. The thumbnail images of unruly men printed on the organization's pamphlet, their short biographies that read like dating profiles. These men weren't real. They were characters, the absurd antagonists in cop dramas.

She kept the pamphlet though, tucked into the bottom of her purse.

...

“I was thinking of not saying anything at all, you know, going out strong and silent.”

Richard smiles through the glass, showing off his crooked incisors, his yellow teeth. In a letter he wrote last year, he mentioned that he was becoming insecure about his teeth.

I don't have money for good toothpaste. And the kind they give us here is shit.

Of all the details he'd written about himself, this is the one that stood out to her. Yellow teeth.

“So why don't you?”

“Why don't I what?”

“Not say anything?”

Richard leans back in his seat, scratching the bottom of his newly smooth chin, “Cause everyone does that. I looked it up. A lot of people don't say anything. I think it's lazy.” Alice stares at him, at his hand, at the simple gesture of reaching up to scratch an unknown itch.

He doesn't look like someone who will be dead tomorrow.

...

In high school, Alice wanted to be a reporter. She wanted to travel the world, to be the first on the scene in war zones, to interview political prisoners, and refugees. She wanted to change the world, to be fearless, and bold, to, when she was 90 years old, be able to tell her grandchildren that her life had been big.

But it turns out the world is hard to change, and most girls from Norton, Ohio aren't made for big lives. When she was 20, Alice met her husband. She got pregnant, then married, and money she'd saved for college was spent on a wedding. She became a mom. She got a part-time job for the local paper, wrote fluff pieces about school fundraisers, and ever so slowly, almost without her noticing, Alice's life became small.

...

“Is there anything you want to say?” She asks, studying the dust that collects on the surface of the metal table.

“No,” Richard frowns. “A lot of people try to make a statement. You know, death penalty is bad, America’s killing ‘em, they’re innocent.”

No one else is in the visiting area, and she tries to picture what this room would look like on a normal day, during regular visiting hours. She imagines partners, and parents, maybe even kids. They would sit in clusters next to their respective phones, sad, and happy at the same time, holding their hands up to the glass and quietly fighting over who would get to talk next.

“Some people apologize, or say they love their families.” Through the phone, Richard’s voice is higher than she thought it would be. Not high. But not low either, just in the middle, with a slight whine beneath his words. He sighs, “I just want to be remembered.”

At this, Alice frowns. She wants to ask him ‘for who?’ Who would look back on his words? He wasn’t a famous murderer; his crime wasn’t heinous enough to garner media attention. No articles had been written about him. No movies would ever be made about him.

He was just one of many who were put on death row, one of the few who weren’t acquitted, who actually made it to their execution date.

...

Alice wrote her first letter in secret, after she left her job at the paper. She waited until the kids were asleep, and her husband was out with his friends. She sat alone at the kitchen island and stared at the thumbnail pictures of the inmates. She chose the one with the shortest bio, the one who looked young and friendly, who wrote that he liked soccer.

Alice liked soccer too. She told him about her favorite team, about the year she got to go see the world cup with a friend's family. She wrote about her husband, her kids, joked about the pains of pregnancy. She asked about him, too, who his favorite team was, if he could watch games in the prison, why he signed up for the program.

The next morning, she didn't leave the letter in their mailbox. Instead, she drove to the nearest post office, and slipped her letter into the blue mail slot with shaking hands.

She decided that this would be for her.

Her kids would have the secrets they whispered to one another in the safety of their backyard playhouse, her husband would have his nights out at bars, and football games. And Alice, she decided, Alice would have this.

...

"You could talk about one of your theories," she tells him.

Over the past 3 years, conspiracy theories have become the main topic of his letters. 9/11 didn't happen, he tells her, the holocaust wasn't real, the moon landing was fake. She never disagrees with him, and sometimes, when she can't think of anything to write, she entertains him, fans the fire with questions: 'How were they able to trick all the world?'

Today though, he shakes his head. "No, people would think I'm dumb." He stares past her, at the guard near the back wall, who stands listening and pretending not to listen at the same time.

Alice takes the opportunity to look at him to study the man she's been talking to all these years, who is bigger than she thought he'd be, whose nose is straight, and strong, and whose hair is cut close to his scalp, but still somehow curly. He's gotten harder over the years, and is no

longer as young, or friendly as he once seemed. She stares until, without warning, his eyes fix back on her.

She flinches like he hit her, but doesn't turn away. She lets him have his turn, cripplingly aware that this is the first time he's seen her, that she had never sent him a photo, or described her appearance. She looks down at the dust, wiping away what she can with the palm of her hand, and hoping, selfishly, perversely, that he'll give her a compliment.

You're prettier than I thought you'd be, he'd say, or younger, maybe, maybe he'd tell her that in her letters she sounded wiser than 35.

"Thank you for coming," he says. "I know it's a long way."

She nods. And he is quiet for a long moment. "Next time I'll kill her in Ohio," he says, the corner of his mouth titled up ever so slightly, "you know, try and get caught somewhere closer to you."

...

Richard told Alice about the woman he killed in his 59th letter, after they had been writing for over a year, after they had exhausted the soccer talk, and the basics about background, after Alice told Richard about her dreams to be a journalist, about the 4-month period when her son refused to eat anything but strawberry protein bars, about her first date with her husband, on a canoe in an algae infested pond.

Richard told Alice about the woman he killed in his 59th letter, after he'd already told her about how his Dad died in a house fire when he was 8, about how he wanted to become a firefighter until he failed the physical evaluation, about how his Mom works as a pediatric nurse, and that she learned to sew so she could make stuffed animals for sick kids.

In his 59th letter, Richard told her about Alexa.

Alexa, who was a neighbor in his apartment building, who he fell in love with during conversations in the elevator, and the laundry room, who politely rejected him, and who he later saw kissing a man outside of her doorway.

She was beautiful, he wrote her, and smart. She was getting a doctorate in engineering and taking night classes while she worked as a bank teller. She had a dog named George, and a mini garden on her fire escape.

He stabbed her 26 times in what became a failed murder-suicide. A neighbor had heard Alexa's screams, and Richard was arrested before he could turn the knife on himself.

...

Her.

Richard always said her. Never someone, or somebody. Always her. Always Alexa. The first time Alice found out about Alexa, she burned the letter. She slept that night clutching her daughter to her chest and didn't write again for another 9 months.

Richard wrote though. He wrote every week, and she read every letter. Letters about the books he was reading, about his exercise routine, about the way they sometimes let the inmates out in the yard to see the sunset, and the way he wondered if she was catching the same sunsets as him.

Finally, in his 92nd letter, he wrote

I'm sorry if you're upset about Alexa. But I'm here for a reason. I don't bullshit people. I don't say I'm innocent, or that I can reform. I'm not a good person, but I like talking to you. Why the fuck did you start talking to someone on death row if you didn't want to talk to a murderer?

Alice read the letter three times. *Why did you write?*

She thought of that night, when her husband told her that daycare would be too expensive with three kids, when she told him that it was okay, she didn't mind leaving her job, staying at home. She thought of the empty kitchen, the wine and the crickets in the backyard. She thought of that hole in her chest, gaping and

The truth was that she wrote to Richard because he hadn't been real. Because she knew he was never getting out, because she could talk and talk and never have to meet the man she was talking to, because she could finally have an adventure without any of it ever becoming real life.

The next morning, she wrote back.

The adventure was over. The characters had become real. But she was the one who'd started the letters, and it would be cruel to stop now.

Still, Alice looks up to Richard's twisted smile, his dark humor hanging in the air between them. She never asked if he regrets what he did. She was afraid of his answer.

"Don't worry about it," she tells him. "I like the drive."

...

Over the next 7 years, Alice and Richard wrote to each other every other week. Alice made sure she was always the one to get the mail. Her husband never knew, and her kids started to grow. She sent the last of them off to kindergarten, and started working again at the local paper, writing stories about car accidents, and neighbors turning 100.

Her oldest turned 11. They had his birthday party at a batting range. Her husband got promoted, he stopped going out so much. He stayed home, and built forts with the kids, he started a baseball card collection. For their 10th anniversary, they went back to the same pond, cleaner now, and had a picnic out on the canoe.

All the while, Alice wrote to Richard. She wrote to him about her kids, about her daughter starting to learn the piano, about her parents, who'd joined a pickle-ball club after retirement, and her mother-in-law, who'd gotten sick for a while, and then better. She wrote to him about her house, about the kitchen renovations, and the guest room she'd converted into a library.

He wrote to her about his Mom, who was refusing to retire. He sent her childhood photos, he talked about his conspiracy theories, the time when he was thirteen and scored a winning goal in his soccer game. He invited her to come visit.

And somehow, somewhere in the 7 years they wrote, Richard became a friend. He became a strange, brotherly figure, who she found out used to be a graphic designer, who'd seen all the Marvel movies, and gave surprisingly good book recommendations.

When his execution date drew near, Alice would feel nauseous. She wouldn't be able to focus at work until eventually, always, a letter would come, written in capital letters with three exclamation marks and four underlines.

STAY!!!

It meant a stay of execution. His date would be pushed. He would stay alive.

And for a little while, Alice thought that this would go on forever, that they would write, and stay friends, until they were both old, and gray, and she died first of natural causes.

She thought, for a little while, until the official letter came, with bold, Times New Roman type, and a warden's signature at the bottom, with a date, time, and her invitation to both visit, and witness the execution.

...

“Do you know what your dinner is going to be?”

She doesn't say last meal.

“Yeah,” he nods. “There was a \$25 limit, so I just got a lot of McDonald's.”

Alice smiles, his Mom used to get him McDonald's after soccer practice.

“Big Mac?” she asks

He nods. “And chicken nuggets.”

“A McFlurry?”

“Obviously.”

She nods. Behind her, the guard shifts. Their time is almost up.

“You could say a poem,” she tells him. For a while, about 3 years ago, Richard signed off each letter with a poem, most written by Frost, or Bukowski.

He shakes his head. “I'll think of something.”

The guard steps forward. Richard smiles at her, a little afraid.

“I'll see you tomorrow.”

17 hours later

They sit in a room with two rows of folding chairs and a window looking into what all the websites call ‘the death chamber.’ On the other side of the glass, everything is white, and clean. There's a padded table that's made specially for these occasions, with belted restraints where the wrists and ankles will go. There's one doctor, three nurses, two guards, and the warden.

In the room with the folding chairs, Alice sits in the back row.

She recognizes Richard's Mom, who wears a black dress and in her hands clutches a small stuffed bear, one that Alice assumes was Richard's childhood stuffed animal. Four seats

away, Alexa's Mom sits alone, a shadow of the woman she used to be. Alice vaguely recognizes her from the trial photographs, but the woman photographed during Richard's trial was strong, and angry. She was a lawyer, Alice remembered, a champion of justice. Today, Alexa's Mom sits alone, bent and frail, her face marred with years of grief. Between her fingers, she twists a rose embroidered handkerchief.

There are other people Alice doesn't know, or recognize. Maybe judges, maybe press. She ignores them, sitting rigid in her seat as the guards lead Richard into the room before them.

In her hotel room last night, she read a lot about executions. She read that every prison employee in the death chamber had to volunteer for the job, as no penitentiary is allowed to coerce their staff into killing a prisoner. She read that, at any moment, if they wanted to, they could back out, leave the room, never look back, and return on Monday with their jobs still waiting.

Even the doctor, if he needed, could leave, and the execution would be rescheduled for another day. She read that the doctor is making 15,000 dollars for these fifteen minutes alone, that he won't make the official kill, but just insert the IV's and allocate the correct dose of each injection.

She read that there are two buttons somewhere in a hidden room, where two men have volunteered to wait. When the warden signals, they will each press their respective button. One will do nothing, and the other will push poison into Richard's veins. Neither will ever know which button was which, and both will leave today with a plausibly clear conscience.

She read that once a week for the next month every person in that death chamber will be required to meet with a counselor. Their mental health will be checked over and over and over again. *Don't feel guilty.* They'll be told. *Never feel guilty.*

When Richard enters the room, he's freshly showered, wearing a new shirt and clean sweatpants (Alice had also read that, along with his new clothes, Richard would be given a diaper, so he wouldn't have to worry about his bladder while he died.)

He waves to his Mom, nods to Alice, and lays on the padded table without a fight. But as the guards begin to tighten the straps around his ankles, his Mom starts to cry, soft sobs that she tries to muffle with her hands.

The room, if possible, becomes quieter. The men in the corner pretend not to notice. Alice focuses on the clock above the execution table.

The only person who moves is Alexa's Mom, who turns to watch as tears drop from Richard's Mom's eyes to her chin, as her body shakes and her hands strangle that small, stuffed bear. Alexa's Mom watches for a moment, and then, with surprising strength, with the strength of that woman she lost so many years ago, she wraps her arm around the woman who gave birth to her daughter's murderer.

In the death chamber, the guards are finished. They push the padded table up until Richard can see through the window. The warden presses an intercom that will let the audience hear his last words.

Richard opens his mouth, and tonight, Alice will drive the 15 hours back to Ohio. When she gets home, the sun will be rising. Her husband will be awake, making coffee in the kitchen and singing along to his Tom Petty playlist. When Alice sees him, she'll start to cry. She'll fall onto the floor in exhaustion, and guilt, and perverse grief. Her husband will hold her, and she'll scream into his chest. When her oldest comes to check if everything is okay her husband will tell their daughter to watch after her younger siblings. He'll tell her to close the door, and he'll wait on the kitchen floor until Alice is out of tears. He'll wait until she can talk again and then she'll

tell him everything. She'll show him the letters, and say that she's sorry, and still her husband will hold her.

In the afternoon, they'll put off chores. Her middle will turn on *Tangled* and Alice will lie on the couch with her three kids squished in around her. The older two will complain, they'll wriggle away, but her youngest will nestle by her side. Her husband will make candy bowls with the secret stash of sweets he has hidden somewhere in the garage, and Alice will cry silently as her little world huddles around her.

But for now, in this second, Alice sits on the cold metal of a folding chair. In front of her two broken mother's comfort each other and Richard opens his mouth, his voice unsteady, and slow.

"I don't think I want to die. But death was always part of that plan." In his eyes, there's real fear there, and the faint whine in his voice Alice suddenly places as a midwestern accent. "I love a lot of people in that room over there. And where I'm going..." He takes time to look at Alice, and then his Mom, and then he smiles, a faint tremor entering his words. "I hope I don't see you on the other side."