

52 : CHARACTER

learned only about the character's physical description and actions, and others' responses to them.

The stories in this unit introduce readers to three rather unusual characters. "Alicia" lets us share the experiences of a young girl as she struggles to understand her older sister's mental illness. "The Father" gives us insight into a family and, in particular, the behaviour of the father. The third story, "The Old Woman," presents us with an elderly woman who is rapidly losing control over her life and needs to be in the care of her family or a nursing home.

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Gabrielle Roy

Alicia

I must tell the story of Alicia; certainly it left the greatest mark upon my life; but how dearly it costs me!

Our Alicia with her huge dark blue eyes! And the so-strange contrast in her between those eyes and her coal-black hair! From Maman she had inherited also the loveliest eyebrows I remember ever to have seen, so roundly arched, so high and sharply delineated that they gave her glance an expression of amazement, of pain at the spectacle of life. She was still herself, with her pale, slender face; yet no, it was no longer Alicia. For already she no longer recognized those she so deeply loved; me alone, at times, she still knew. Her strange eyes would come back from so far away that to see them return filled me with dread; then she would look at me, smile at me as before, maybe she would even kiss me in the joy of rediscovering me; but she clung to me too tightly; and of her, of Alicia. I now was frightened! Then she would go back to where she had come from; her eyes would lose us all, relatives, friends, little sister. There would be no one but herself imprisoned within her queer look. Even then I could imagine how terrible it must be to be all alone within oneself.

"Whatever is the matter with Alicia?" I would go ask Maman.

At home we were always very reluctant to cry where anyone could see us. But how very often, at that time, when I went into the kitchen and found Maman alone, I caught her wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron! And she would hastily become a person with a great deal to do, who cannot be bothered. I would insist, "What's the matter with Alicia?"

They—I mean the grownups—were protecting me from the truth. They told me Alicia had nothing the matter with her. Is this what constitutes childhood: by means of lies, to be kept in a



world apart? But *they* could not prevent my seeking; and seeking by myself alone, without help, kept bringing me back into their world.

It was summer. A hotter, more brilliant summer I do not think there ever was on Rue Deschambault. We were as though readied for happiness, with our trees full of fruit, flowers all around the house, the lawn well-cropped. If I remember that summer so well, certainly it was because the season was so out of joint, so little in tune with our thoughts. Alicia alone seemed not to be aware of this contrast. She, who was the cause of our misery, withdrew from it as though she had no part in it; almost all the time she was humming.

One day she went up to the attic.

Constantly we would ask each other, worried, as though concerned about a tiny little child who had eluded our watchfulness, "Where is Alicia?"

And almost every day I would find the answer, "In the attic." Once, though, it took me a long while to discover her. She had hidden herself in the depths of a dark cupboard, and when I at last found her, she was holding her head in her hands; this time she was crying.

Yet how was it that, having found her in an attitude which indicated she wanted to play hide-and-seek with me, I had no feeling that this was a game, nor any taste to join in it? In the past she and I had often played at hiding from each other; yet when we found each other once more, it was to bubble with laughter or accuse each other of cheating.

"Where is Alicia?" Maman would ask me.

And I would tell her; I would say: "Today she's braiding flowers and singing."

Why was it so sad to see Alicia spend hours weaving flowers together to make necklaces and bracelets for her adornment? Merely because she was no longer a little girl?...

One day in the attic Alicia put on a long white dress; around her waist she fastened a wide, sky-blue belt; in her hair she tucked some roses. I had never seen her look so lovely; and why

was it sad to see her thus? She leaned out of the garret window toward the street and began scattering petals from the roses over the heads of the occasional passers-by. And she sang plaintively, "Here are flowers . . . good people. . . Here are roses for you who walk by! . . ."

I don't know why, but I felt obliged to tell Maman that Alicia was throwing roses at the heads of the people in the street; one might have thought it somehow disgraced us.

"Go back up to her; try to distract her," said Maman. "Get her away from the window."

That day, however, Alicia did not even know me. When I tried to make her move, she abruptly gave me a malignant glance and began screaming "Judas! Judas!" at me. I was terribly afraid of Alicia, and ran off trembling. Yet it was only yesterday that Alicia had been taking care of me. She was responsible for me when Maman was very tired or when, wanting a full afternoon undisturbed to tackle some major sewing project, she handed me over to Alicia. She would say, "Alicia, don't you want to take the Little One for a walk? Will you look out for her?" Many an older sister would not have enjoyed constantly to be encumbered with a little girl like me. But Alicia never wounded me by seeming to be bored at the prospect of having to look after me.

It's true that I gave her the least possible trouble. We would leave the house together, and I was enchanted at seeing that we always took to the wilder side of the street. Never did we go—Alicia and I—toward town; that did not interest us; we would follow the narrow wooden sidewalk as far as the last house on our street. Then we would continue on across the fields, soon reaching our little grove of black oaks. In my childhood I thought this grove huge; I believed it a forest. . . . I have long realized that it was merely a largish clump of trees none too close together; it could not even wholly hide from us the distant gable of our house. No matter; it was among these small black oaks that I most fully felt the slightly dangerous mystery, the attractions, the solemn joy of being in the woods. Alicia helped me maintain this feeling. She would say to me, as we drew near our little oaks, "See! They look

just like conspirators wrapped in their long, black coats." Then we forgot that the oaks were conspirators; we stretched out on the grass and watched the acorns fall, which sometimes landed right on our noses, when we had not been quick enough to dodge them. We could spend hours without exchanging a word. Already Alicia's thoughts, though, were not always happy. One day, having announced to her that when I grew up, I would do fine and beautiful things, Alicia told me sadly, "One says that, and then one never accomplishes anything except paltry things of no account."

"But mine will be great!"

Then, as though I were ill, exposed to I know not what, Alicia took me in her arms; she rocked me under a small oak tree rustling quietly in the wind, and I felt as though I were being cradled by the tree, the sky, by an inexhaustible tenderness. Yet when I pulled myself a little away from Alicia, I saw she was crying.

She told me: "You see, what I should like is that no one suffer. I'd like to spend my life preventing sorrow from touching people—Papa, Maman first of all, and then—oh, everyone. Why not everyone? How much hurt is in the world!"

Whereupon she had again clasped me in her arms, saying "I'll defend you. I won't let them do you harm!"

Now, however, she did not see how miserable we were. She remembered no one of us. She was our greatest unhappiness. When visitors came, we tried to hide her. There were some of our acquaintances and friends who still asked after her; the majority pretended they no longer included her in our number; yet some few still asked Maman, "And your daughter Alicia?"

Maman would explain how Alicia had been stricken with a fever which had, as it were, consumed her, adding that the doctors said of such illnesses: either they killed you or else the sequel was worse than death. . . .

And I would go off into a corner of the garden to ponder her words. Whatever could be worse than death? I suppose I preferred

to keep Alicia, unhappy, than to see her die. I was afraid lest now they wanted her dead. And from then on it was I who kept saying, "I'll defend Alicia. I won't let them do her any harm...." But one day she bit me savagely; and Maman noticed it.

She was trembling while she questioned me: "She hurt you? And—before this—has it ever happened that she hurt you?"

I could not wholly deny it; I was filled with bottomless terror. Then it was that *they* decided to send Alicia away: *They* did not tell me the truth; *they* arranged the truth; *they* wholly transformed it. To all my desperate insistence—"Where is Alicia?"—*they* replied that she was in good hands, that perhaps she would return to health, that I must pray for her. And then, from time to time, I would still ask, "What's the matter with Alicia?"

And Maman, who had been so patient with me, put me off rather harshly: "Don't you see I'm so busy I don't know what I'm about? Leave me alone!" said Maman.

One day Papa and Maman were talking confidentially. I could tell by their faces when what they had to say was of interest to me. I pretended to be busy coloring my picture book. Papa and Maman glanced at me, then continued their conversation.

"It's a chance worth taking," Papa was saying. "Alicia loved her sol...."

"But she's only a child!... And to take her to such a place, Edouard!" said Maman. "Do you realize?..."

But Papa replied, "She was so fond of the baby! The joy of seeing her again, perhaps... Shouldn't we try everything?"

"At her age," and Maman indicated me with a motion of her chin, "she could be marked for life...."

Papa insisted, "Remember how she loved her. If anyone can still do anything, it's surely our baby.... Only she can work that miracle...."

Then, realizing that they expected a miracle of me, I scuttled off and hid beneath the lower branches of the balsams. They hunted for me all afternoon; and when by evening they had not yet found me, they kept calling from the house, "Petite Misère! Christine!"

Underneath the evergreens in the darkness I was thinking of the picnics we so often had had together—just the two of us, Alicia and I. I presume that she had retained from childhood that need, that deep taste for independence, since we—we children—have so little true independence. In any case, to her as to me, nothing seemed less agreeable, more tiresome, than to sit down at the table for a meal. Thus quite often we persuaded Maman to give us permission to take some bread and jam, which we then consumed—was it not strange?—in a cornfield lying a little beyond the oak grove on the edge of the diminutive Seine River. This spot was not a bit comfortable; it afforded us no least level space on which to spread out our food, and obviously there was no view. Nonetheless, between the high rows of corn, Alicia and I had long taken delight in feeling as though we were closed in, well-protected, wholly hidden. We spent hours there, not in the least embarrassed by the fact that we had just enough room to sit down—to stoop, rather—between the close-planted stalks. The rustling of the big leaves, the occasional cry of a bird in the field, a sound as of rippling water which the wind made as it brushed the young ears, their silk, which we tore off to make ourselves beards or moustaches—to us all this was pleasure and high fun! Moreover—and this gave us a warm feeling of security—no one could possibly have come near us without our hearing them. In the cornfield we were as in a fortress, well-protected against others by the extreme pliancy of the stalks which, by the least change in the tone of their crackling, would have betrayed any invasions of our domain. Maman, however, eventually learned where we spent our afternoons; she had already begun to be anxious.

"In the corn! Why always go eat in the corn when there are such lovely other places?"

Very early in the morning Maman and I left to go there.

On the way I asked, "Have you locked Alicia up?"

Maman tried to laugh. "Locked up! What an ideal! Of course not: she's in very good hands. She's being cared for by the best doctors."

But the small town we came to had a dismal look, unlike any other town. At least, so I saw it. Perhaps it was because of me. Since those days I have noticed that our thoughts have a great and curious power over things: on certain days they can make seem beautiful some wretched gray hovel; yet it can also happen that they make very ugly something that is not such in itself. This town seemed to me silent, bored, and somehow ill at ease in the sunlight. On a low hill a little outside the town, there towered a large, high building still more silent and more severe than all the rest; it was to this structure that we bent our steps. But I should mention that on arriving Maman had to ask directions, and she asked with a blush, in a low, unhappy tone. Now that we knew our way, we approached the high brick building and we soon became aware that it was placed in the midst of rather handsome grounds, with paths, seats, even swings, and many trees. But whence came the impression that despite these grounds, this structure had no means of exit anywhere? Maybe because of an iron fence all round it....

I remembered the field of corn; there one was locked in, true enough, but it was a very different thing!... Might not freedom reside in remaining within a very tiny space which you can leave if you have a mind to?

And how many trips had I already made with Maman, I thought to myself; some of them the finest in the world, in which I saw everything around me, others so sad they hid from me every vista. How strange is travel!

We knocked on a heavy door. A most impassive woman received us in a parlor. I say parlor for lack of a better word, since it was much better furnished than a convent or priest's house parlor. There was reading matter scattered about, good easy chairs gaily upholstered in chinitz. Nevertheless, the idea would not have occurred to me to call this room a living room; you could be there only for the purpose of waiting... waiting... Such was the message of its silence; and yet all sorts of tiny sounds reached you from afar, like soft, almost fleeting footsteps, and the noise of keys: keys being turned in locks, keys swinging on a chain tied

around the waist. Then I heard a peal of laughter, brief but frightening; I quickly held my hands to my ears. Maman seemed not to have heard it. She did not even notice how greatly I was terrified. Maman must have been deeply saddened no longer even to notice my own sadness. *They* say that sorrow brings people together. This is not always true; that day sorrow built a round wall tight closed about Maman as she sat erect on a straight-backed chair.

Then we heard footsteps coming toward us. The door opened. In the company of a blue-uniformed woman Alicia stood on the threshold. I say Alicia also for want of anything better. For it could not be Alicia who stood that way, her head bent, her body sagging as though broken, broken in I know not what abominable fashion!

And I wanted to cry out to the woman, to the building, to the whole red town, "What have you done to Alicia?"

The woman in uniform told Maman that *she* was much better, that obviously one could not expect too much, but that there was progress; then she left us.

Alicia, having sat down, remained motionless, unseeing.

"Alicia," said Maman, ever so gently, "don't you recognize me?" And Maman named herself: "Your mother..." yet so embarrassed at having to say it that, like a wax taper, she seemed to burn and then melt away....

Alicia lifted her head a little; her eyes gave Maman a sideways glance; they swept over Maman's face as though it were that of a pleasant stranger... and moved on elsewhere....

It's curious, but only then did I understand the words that, for some time now, Maman occasionally murmured to herself. "In my grave... I wish I were in my grave!..."

Then she encouraged me with a brief gesture, not over-persuasive, as though she thought, "Do try—you—to work the miracle."

I slipped out of my chair. I moved close to Alicia. I put my arms around her waist, and I, also, called out to her, "Alicia!"

She smiled at me then, but it was like the smile of a small child, who recognized only very vaguely, by their faces, by their voices, those who love her. And my heart was broken; I know it

must have been broken; I had no more courage left for the miracle. I let my head fall over Alicia's knees and I began to cry, suddenly remembering the rustle of the corn leaves above us.

Then I felt Alicia's hands, which softly stroked my wet cheek, as though to take stock of something inexplicable, very strange; and as though this hand was going forth to meet a habit long-forgotten and little by little rediscovered, it began to stroke my temples and my hair:

I turned my head on Alicia's knees. Her eyes were straining, focusing on a problem so absorbing that their pupils betrayed no slightest motion. You would have thought that a light from deep within her was striving to reach her eyes; and that made me think of long dark corridors through which one passes with a lamp in one's hand.... Had Alicia, then, so long a distance to traverse, alone in those black corridors? And was it recollection—that tiny glow which from time to time I saw shine behind her eyes?

Abruptly the light shone brighter there. With her small lamp shining in her hand, Alicia must have been nearing the end of the passage; thoughts, real thoughts, flitted across her face, but like veiled, uncertain passengers. Oh, how deeply stirring it is to behold a soul returning to a human countenance!

Alicia held me with her eyes. She looked at me intensely, smiled at me, found my name. She even spoke to me: "The little One! It's you! Where on earth did you come from all by yourself?"

And then she cried out: "You've come to get me! It's you who have come to get me!... I knew you'd come!..."

And joy flooded her face as though it were the sun itself. Was it not a thing to marvel at? Returning to life, Alicia's soul first of all found joy! As though the soul had been made for joy!...

But at once her lips, her hands began to tremble! Why, immediately after joy, did despair cast itself upon her? Never before had I seen despair, and yet I recognized it. Such it surely was: a moment of lucidity, when you see your life and the harm you do others, all their unhappiness, yet no longer is it possible to change anything about it; it is too late; or else you were yourself only the instrument of suffering.... About that, one can do nothing.

This despair did not last long. Neither Maman nor I could have endured it longer ... nor Alicia herself. It was killing her, as it were, before our very eyes.

For one sole instant, then, we were ourselves within Alicia, and she herself was within us, and we were upon one single shore, close enough to touch, to see one another.... Then despair took Alicia away.... She began to draw off, and, abruptly, a darksome, invisible stream dug its way between us. Alicia, on the far shore, was moving away ... mysteriously ... she withdrew. I yearned to call her, so far gone was she already. And she, like someone about to disappear—she raised her hand and waved it toward us.

After this she seemed like a well-behaved little girl of about my age who toys with her fingers, crossing and then uncrossing them.

She died a few months later. *They* buried her, as one buries everybody, whether a person has died on the day of his death—or long before, because, maybe, of life itself.... What difference can there be here?... And why did they say of Alicia that God ... when He came to take her ... had shown her a mercy?...

RESPONDING PERSONALLY

1. Describe a memorable childhood friend you once played with.
2. Record your views about why mental illness takes some people into other worlds.

RESPONDING CRITICALLY

3. Who are the protagonist and focal character of the story? Compare ideas with a partner.
4. What foreshadowing is there of Alicia's increasing mental instability? Why couldn't her younger sister help her?
5. In a small group, discuss the meaning of the last paragraph. Do you think this paragraph provides an effective ending to the story? Why or why not?