

Independence, Someday

Mel had told me to go. It was on one of his good days. “Promise me you’ll be at Lissa’s on July 4th. You’re going to be OK when I’m gone, Darlin’. Don’t hide yourself away.” He was emaciated but his smile still warmed me.

Over time, I came to believe that he was right: I should go to the family reunion. It might even make be an end-point to my status as Grieving Widow. In the three months since Mel’s funeral I hadn’t eaten very well, so my good casual clothes didn’t fit. For the party, I ordered nice-looking new white pants, a red polka dot shirt and a white straw hat, all delivered conveniently to my door. I painted my nails, both fingers and toes, with *Flag Red* gel polish and cleaned up my white sandals. When I refilled my prescription at CVS, I bought a lipstick in a pleasing shade of red. I had decided I would look strong, and be strong.

The party had started when I arrived. Lissa and Ted pulled their families together annually for this one day and this year, everyone was there, except Mel, of course. She was Mel’s twin sister and reminded me of him in so many ways. She gave me a warm hug, “You look nice. How are you doin’?”

I raised my chin, “I’m fine.” It came out sounding possibly a bit too firm, so I smiled to soften it.

She glanced at my eyes and nodded. “Today may be tough. Just do what you want. But, we’re both so glad you’re here.” She hugged me again, put a glass of tea in my hand and went off to greet some cousin of Ted’s.

At the grill, Ted was producing an endless stream of burgers and franks. The night before, I had suddenly remembered that Mel had always smoked a pork shoulder to bring to this reunion. I finally got up at one and made a chocolate chess pie. I worried that Lissa might have expected more from me or, even worse, expected less. I pushed the thought aside: chess pie was what I could do.

The patio was loaded with cousins: couples with their kids and grandkids. I walked around and said hello here and there. The sun felt merciless and when children jumped into the swimming pool, droplets of water spray glittered like diamonds, or broken glass.

Having done my social duty, I found a shady corner to sit in while I ate. A young man I sort of thought I knew was sitting nearby. He said, pleasantly, “You may not remember me. I’ve been away for a few years. I’m Frank.”

“Hi, Frank. I’m Alice—Mel’s, Mel’s widow.” *Widow* is such a terribly hard word. I just couldn’t say anything after it.

He drew a deep breath and looked down at his glass. “Yes, I was sorry to hear... about that.” Then, with a hint of relief, told me, “Oh, there’s Linda, my wife, looking for me. It’s nice to see you again, Alice. I hope things are going, um, all right.”

As he walked away, a too-familiar, horrible wave of grief jolted me physically, nearly knocking me over. I hadn’t had one of those in the past month and hoped I was done with them—but, no. I calmed myself and looked down. When the feeling wrenched me, I had let the paper plate tip and my burger had fallen into pieces on my lap and slid to the ground. A long streak of grease

and ketchup marred my crisp white pants. I couldn't move for a while. I sat there and didn't even cry.

Lissa came over. "Alice, dear, are you OK?"

"No. not yet. Sweetie, I'm not ready. This is a great party, but I'm nothing more than a ghost here. I should go home. Call me next week and we'll have lunch soon, the two of us." She understood and hugged me.

I looked around the patio at all those people who seemed fine: relaxed, talking and eating hot dogs. *It's funny: almost everyone goes through this, but they're acting as if they don't know. I can't be here today, and I'm not sure how they can.* I fled to my car and went home. For the entire drive I wondered if I could ever relax again. I knew I could, but I needed more time.

Mel's cat Cleo met me at the door, purring. I didn't even try to clean the white pants: I threw them out, though that's not me. I put my new shirt in the laundry and set my hat in the closet. I opened a can of chili that tasted like cardboard and grease, but couldn't care. I turned up the AC and sat in front of the television, with my feet up and Cleo snuggled on my lap. Later that night, when the firework broadcast ended, I went to bed, resolving that the next day I would buy salad veggies. Some things are accomplished in baby steps. Some things take time. *It's true*, I thought, *I'm sleeping better these days.*

Next year, I'll go to Lissa and Ted's Independence Day reunion. I'll be almost fine by then and should fit back into my old clothes. But, I will wear dark pants to that party. Just in case.