

Alice

by Kate Axelrod

Alice writes three different versions of the letter. The last one is the most tempered, the most like her, but still it is such an unlike-her thing to do. The couple who lives above her has been disrupting her sleep nearly every night for the past three weeks. The woman's orgasms are fierce and operatic, high pitched and desperate. Alice thinks she can hear their skin slapping together, sometimes even a palm slamming against the headboard in some triumphant gesture. The letter she ends up leaving for them, slipped gently beneath their door, is polite and kind of obnoxious. She says they can do whatever they'd like, but asks if they could please keep it down while their neighbors are trying to sleep. She leaves it at that. She has only met the couple a handful of times—she knows that Daniel has recently moved to Brooklyn from Bolivia and that Natalie is a student and a part-time dog walker. Alice sees her often around the neighborhood, she always seems to be glowing, happy in this unnatural sort of way. Smiling and so at ease despite the half-dozen leashes tangled around her wrists, the multitude of tiny dogs yelping at her feet.

Two days after Alice leaves the note, Daniel knocks on her door. It's hot out but he's wearing brown corduroy pants. She looks down at his feet. He's wearing flip flops and his toes look swollen from the heat but also flattened, like they're melting. I got your note, he says, in a way that is both cold and apologetic. Before he can say anything else, Alice begins to apologize. It was so stupid, so unnecessary, she says. (She worries that it was rooted in the very worst part of herself—that place of raw envy. Her own sex life so dull and passionless. Maybe it's a lie that they are disrupting her sleep. Maybe it's simply her own boredom—that plain hollowness—tugging at her, like a small child pulling at the hem of a dress, begging for attention.) She's apologizing but then Daniel stops her. He doesn't look embarrassed but tired, resigned. I've been working at night, he says. Trying to make some extra money. She looks at him, her mind is not working fast enough, and so he says it again. I work at night,

so that is not me you hear her fucking. It is somebody else. Do you see? But she is gone. You will be able to sleep more peacefully, no?

Alice thinks about inviting him in, about offering him something to eat but all she has is Frosted Flakes and red wine and vegetarian bacon. If she were a different (braver?) person she would ask him to stay and he'd collapse under the weight of his grief and into her. She would let him cup her breasts and grope greedily for her flesh and she would even moan like Natalie to make him feel like more of a man. She wonders if her hunger for intimacy is stronger than his. But they both just stand there, and Alice's tabby kitten walks in circles between Daniel's legs, brushing her tail slowly along his calves. Alice says she's sorry again. She wants to say that it all sounded fake anyway, like some performance, and that it meant nothing. Just sex, certainly not love. But nothing Alice says about Natalie's infidelity will really make any difference. Daniel doesn't respond to her apology but for a moment he stares behind her at the newly painted kitchen walls. Pale purple and green. You need another coat, he says, and then walks away.

