

Supersymmetric: Almost but not quite

by Alison Wells

The particular memory of Alice was enduring, like a rock carved out with a hammer and chisel, inconsequential shards stripped away to reveal only the essential. There was nothing that she and Noel had liked more than sitting down together on the seafront with a big bag of fish and chips watching the waves.

She was a beauty, inside and out. They had married young, stayed together. They had settled, Noel supposed, for life, for each other, but it was the settling of earth, of something substantial and comforting, soil spilling into crevices, ready. They'd had a daughter, Ava, born in the Spring, right at the start of their marriage. All beginnings.

Alice had believed in ghosts. She saw them early on the landing or in one of the east facing bedrooms. She told him that she could walk through the ghosts or that they streamed through her on bright mornings as she stood looking out of the window at the long, quiet fields of strong grass and meaty ploughed ground. He thought that it was just those dust motes, fairies — Ava called them — but Alice insisted that they existed, though, unseen. It was how he felt about God. You didn't need to search for him.

He was just there, omniscient, as the catechism said, 'I am with you always, yes, even till the end of time.'

Money was tight; he'd worked at a variety of things, changing his stated occupation like a man shedding skins. His Dad was almost at retirement age. He'd used to work in the Switzers store back in the 1980's before it became another entity entirely although remaining in the same location. Lately he and his Dad did odd jobs for people, had a van, moved stuff from A to B and back again like fireflies zipping across the Irish evening.

It was one March that the van was involved in a large head-on collision on the M50 that nearly took him from Alice. Well it did for a while. He spent a month in a coma, an in between place where he was neither dead nor truly alive. And she sat by his bedside knowing that anything could still happen, that he could be returned to her, whole and healed, that one morning he might open his eyes, move his dry lips and pin himself to the world and to her with the weight of lucid words, of recognition. Alternatively he might just disappear, untraceably sinking into the void without giving off any evidence of existence. Once it was all over and he was back home, she confided in him that each time she went into the hospital — a massive, sprawling building — she could hear her heart thudding in her head because she never knew exactly what she was going to find.

Alice was the kind of woman who saw the positive in everything. She made the best of imperfection, regarded it, and consequently him, with a wry compassion. So she made a policy of encouragement and care. As they sat together in the evenings she would often take both of his hands and tell him what a fine man she thought he was. But all he had done worth doing was loving her enough to stay faithful and make the most of what the world threw at him.

But she left him. Cancer, of course. Good cells and bad cells faced in opposition. It was only months, quicker than either of them had expected.

He lost weight, although he thought that he was eating round about the same as usual. Noel and his daughter kept the same mealtime routines. They laid the table with the placemats and coasters, the way Alice used to, took glasses from the cabinet that she had put away, exchanging her touch for theirs. They went on as if nothing at all had changed, as if she would show up at any minute. They made lasagne, roast chicken and stew and ate it. But still he grew thinner. It was as if Alice had somehow given him mass just by being there.

Time went forward, against logic almost, he didn't know if the ticking of the clock brought him further from her, or closer. Despite

the catastrophe of losing her, the kind of person Alice had been, and all that she had been to *him* remained and the fire of sunsets did not enrage him or wring tears. And the dusk was a soft blanket of nostalgia, cosying up the impending night.

The night was black though. Black like the coal Noel's grandad used to hock around Dublin on a horse and cart back in the 50's, as black as his hands and face before his wife handed him the soap, ironically coal tar. As black as the ink of a startled octopus from those David Attenborough shows Alice had been fond of. As black as his socks with a hole in them she used to sew while watching. The octopus has three hearts you know. Yes, No and Maybe.

As black as inkpots, inkjets, as black as typewriter ribbons and the Gutenberg press, as black as the ink of a trillion writers documenting humanity. As black as old blood, as black as if it was a night without stars, without the cold rock of the moon shining, as black and long as a suicidal Scandinavian's midwinter night, without the aurora, because with the aurora, everything changed. There was pole dancing, magnetic strips, a feather boa trailed seductively across the skies with a raunchy joie de vivre. But extinguish the remembrance of light from your mind. Flip the mirror. See the old black and white TV make your entertainment disappear through a collapsing pinprick. As black as space. Zero gravity. Where there is nothing left but the sense of your own fear. Nothing sucks. Black nothing.

The astronaut flailing in the solar wind. Cut adrift. 'Like that song' Leon was thinking — David Bowie in his Ziggy phase. Space Oddity. Celia used to be crazy about it. The guy was never going to make it home. Hope crumbling in the insides of him, his courage inverts to reckless abandon. His silences shrieking across the Anti-verse. Black like the Goth Leon used to be, listing to the Cure on the floor of dimly lit bedsits with his hand in spilt oil tresses of aging Morticia Addams lookalikes. Though black was night the

mornings made Leon angry, shepherds warnings shaking their ripped fists through the flimsy curtains. Mornings at the end of unslept nights, clock ticking nights, stopped clocks, writing

publishable and citable papers, wrestling concepts, elucidating. Head on hands. In the dreaded dead of, losing Celia was like tearing a hole in the fabric of the universe. She would have laughed at that, with her hand on her hip and her lipstick like an on fire sunset. What had she been to him? He couldn't grasp it. He didn't know.

Working at the university, he'd put on weight over time, although he didn't know how, he skipped lunch, had crisps for dinners and slept through breakfast. He drank coffee, black, with three sugars instead. But usually, instead of glucose, he fed on quark-gluon plasma, the primordial soup from which all particles emerged. They were looking for the Higgs Boson, the mass particle, the particle that lends weight to all other particles.

They were like two opposing forces, him and Celia. He was a Cancer, she was Aries. Neither of them believed in astrology but it gave her yet another reason to dump him, quicker than expected. It was only months.

She had a way of bringing people down, undermining what was good. To her, he was a yawn inducing boffin. He took her hands and tried to explain his fervour, how Feynman's legendary work had brought him into the field. She let go of his hands. 'Be Feynman then, she said, if you want, another passionless man chasing after proofs.' He wanted to prove her wrong, to say how ardently Feynman had loved his first wife, his childhood sweetheart who died early, how he had put the heart into science. Because of him Leon had wanted to achieve something extraordinary.

Passion, paid off, out of several Phd students in his year, he was the man who became involved in the collision project in Switzerland. He'd phoned his Dad to share the good news but his Dad didn't really get it, or want to, they'd never been that close. His Dad was loaded; spending money was his ultimate satisfaction. He couldn't see what pleasure there could possibly be in just finding things out.

In March they started up the Large Hadron Collider. Physicists were attempting to break up the quark-gluon plasma and find a spectrum of particles and sub atomic particles that could answer fundamental questions about the forces and interactions between

electrons, quarks, neutrinos and other sub atomic particles. They were hoping to gain evidence for supersymmetric particles which mirrored The Standard Model particles. These supersymmetric particles might even include possible candidates for dark matter. Leon had entered CERN's massive building each day with his heartstrings strumming the tune of possibility, never knowing what had or was about to be found.

When things were good between Leon and Celia, they would stand leaning against each other on the landing or in the bedroom in the early morning before she left for work. He would tell her that 50 trillion solar neutrinos pass through the human body every second. And you couldn't feel a thing. It was the closest thing to spirits from another world. Leon thought it was pretty bloody awesome, although Celia took some convincing. Now he was looking for the God particle and he would keep looking, they all would, until they found it, until they could be sure it existed.

They had already found the first particle they were looking for. It was known as a beauty quark. Then the first sub atomic particle, W, became evident. Things emerging, coming out of the soup. At one point there'd been a question mark whether Celia was pregnant. It was Autumn, the leaves thickening on the ground, sweet rotting. They must have been mistaken, he couldn't even remember the details now, the idea just faded away as if it had never been real. When they split up he felt old, jaded. With Celia it had always been about endings.

If Celia had still been around, she and Leon could have sat chilling, riffing about particle waves, enjoying the concept of fission chips, where the hammer and chisel of the LHC split shards from the Universe's stone, shards that flew and held the light for instances, revealing everything — but nothing about Celia — before they quickly disappeared into particle dust.

