

ALICE IN AUTUMN

There's a house around the corner from me whose front yard is still filled with plastic tombstones inscribed with corny epitaphs (*Scared E. Cat; You're Next*), and behind the grave markers is a yellow and blue sign reading *Stand With Ukraine*. Every time I pass by the yard I think the caption should be: *Halloween During Wartime*. It is a strange period we've all been living through—maybe it will continue to be strange from now on—as we lumber from contagions to hurricanes to subway assailants to election deniers—all under autumn trees.

I thought about the enduring beauty of trees as Lynn and I drove to Doylestown, PA, the other weekend to visit my retired English Department supervisor Alice Boyle. (Her full name is the astonishingly Irish: Alicia Patricia Coyle-Boyle.) Alice had just turned 95—and I hadn't seen her in about six months, when I drove her to a retired-faculty lunch. Alice doesn't drive (has never driven, I think), and so I'd picked her up at her garden apartment in Summit. It's a building from the 1930s—the hallways filled with steam radiators—and Alice's small apartment looked as it must have years ago. It was cramped and filled almost entirely with books, stacked everywhere: on the floor, on the upright piano, on every windowsill, mantle, tabletop. Its clutter seemed to embody a lifetime devoted to literature, steeped in words.

At that point, six months ago, Alice took my arm, and walked with me down the stairs (no elevator) towards my car. Not long after, she called to say she had fallen and was now staying with relatives in Doylestown. A few weeks ago, she called to tell me that she had been moved to an assisted-living facility in Doylestown.

I wanted to visit her, and Lynn, who knew how much she meant to me, wanted to come along. Alice had believed in me. Her championship of my arguably eccentric teaching style had allowed me flourish in a career for over thirty years. She'd understood that I was trying to be the kind of teacher I'd hoped for as a student myself.

Our visit with her was on a bright autumn day—the trees were half orange. The GPS said Doylestown was an hour and five minutes away, but a fall festival going in New Hope (*Corn Maze! Pick Your Own!*) slowed us to a standstill by the old barns selling antiques (*Browse At Your Own Risk*). Lynn had fashioned Alice a bouquet of flowers from our garden; I'd brought a box of maple-leaf-shaped sugar cookies. We were now a half hour behind schedule; I phoned Alice to tell he we were coming but we were lost. We'd mistimed lunch as well—and now we were parked in some cornfield: hungry, lost, late. But Lynn, through her phone, finally found the place...

We signed ourselves in at the main desk: a dauntingly detailed computer security system that demanded to know our contact phone numbers, emails, and if we'd had COVID recently.

The receptionist led us down the hallway to Alice's room. The muzak played Engelbert Humperdinck singing "Please Release Me." I said: "They're playing the theme song for this place."

The receptionist laughed. "There's more truth to that than you know."

Alice was waiting in her bright, clean room. She was lying on a reclining chair with her feet extended—and I could see at once that she probably couldn't walk any longer without serious assistance. But I could also see that she was resolutely the same Alice: the same shy, impish sense of humor and irony; the same life in

her face; the same smile; the same glasses over the same sharp eyes that burned with intelligence and intensity and strength. It did my heart good to see her so very much herself, at 95, and there, next to her reclining chair, a stack of books!

“Your eyes are still good enough to read?”

“Oh, yes,” she said.

And then she proceeded to ask Lynn about *her* life. She complimented us on *The Metuchen Times*—to which she subscribed. What were *we* reading? What were *we* doing? Lynn asked Alice about her summers abroad studying literature in Ireland, England, and Greece. Alice could remember watching Greek plays performed in the Parthenon.

Alice also loved the maple cookies. And she loved the tree changing color outside her window, and she loved watching the suet bird feeder that hung from a branch from that tree.

We all shared cider and cookies. We were there for an hour, and never once during that entire hour did Alice complain about her health, never complained about her legs, never complained about her being in assisted living. Alice explained that *she* had insisted she be moved to assisted living, despite protestations from relatives. She said: “It would have been unfair to ask them to provide all the services I needed.”

When we left, Lynn took my hand when she saw tears in my eyes. “We’ll come see her again,” she said.

We had arrived exhausted, hungry, and cranky. We had left in a sort of wonder.

“There’s a lesson there,” I said, “about how to age.”

The ride home was largely silent. Our own pains seemed pretty insignificant set against the brave tapestry of Alice’s life.