

Alice's Adventures Beyond the Canal

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Alice soon realised that it was impossible to stay angry while trying to figure out which way was up from inside the canal. Everything had slowed down when she slid off the path, but as she hit the water, Grandma's calm voice appeared in her head,

"OK, you know what to do. Relax and your body will take you to the surface."

And she had floated and found that she could breathe. Alice turned her head towards the row of houses that backed onto the canal, prepared to shout for help, when she looked again. The houses were not above her as she expected, but below. Alice caught sight of a passing duck – it was head down, with its feet paddling as though the duck was walking on the sky.



When Alice thought about this later – she realised that this is the point at which she should have been alarmed. Instead, her annoyance had returned. She wanted to prove Grandma wrong. She had gotten herself into this mess and she was going to get herself out.

Grandma's voice came back,

"Learn to pay attention, the answers are always there if you know how to look."

If the world was upside down in this canal, then it meant she could stand on her head. Alice had never been able to do a cartwheel and whoa! Alice lifted her legs and stretched her hands above her head and paused for a moment when they touched the mud on the bottom of the canal.

Alice could not stop herself from an upside-down smile. Bit by bit she felt around with her hands and got used to walking on them. This was cool. Alice thought that if she followed the canal as though she were walking back home alongside it, then she could get there. She didn't stop to think about her orientation

– all she was thinking about was doing her chores before Grandma got home from the Space Lab. Alice loved visiting the Space Lab – everyone looked up to Grandma because she was Head of Research. Thinking about the Space Lab reminded Alice what Grandma had said that morning about not supporting her work experience application until she showed more responsibility.



Alice startled. She'd gotten lost in her thoughts – where was she? How do you know which way is right or left when you are upside down? She thought she had taken the right turn but in front of her was a building she hadn't seen before – a lighthouse. Balancing on one hand Alice reached out to knock on the door and found herself swiftly pulled in and spun round. Alice swayed – unlike in the canal – everything in the lighthouse was the right way up again. She looked around the extraordinary room, full of machines that were being manipulated by a Jester. Each machine was framed by a pair

of dark windows. The Jester was dressed like a harlequin from an old-fashioned set of playing cards and before Alice had a chance to say hello the Jester spoke, "I expect you're trying to get home." At the word home, a tear escaped from Alice's eye. Alice sniffed and said that all she needed was some directions at which the Jester smiled. "Haven't you ever thought?" the Jester asked, "that sometimes, there is a quicker way to do things?" Alice was fighting back her tears. "Look at all these fabulous machines", he continued as he waved his arms around the room. "If we train them how to do something, they can do it much faster than we can, which saves hours of messing around. And every minute saved can sometimes save lives." The Jester could see that Alice was not convinced. "Come and have a look here" he said, pointing to a screen showing a group of orcas swimming in the Salish Sea. "Look closely" the Jester said. "Can you tell who is who?" Alice looked around the screen and saw snapshots of different orcas labelled with names. One was called Tahlequah. She looked back at the ones who were swimming, but it wasn't easy to tell. Arg! What would Grandma say? "Learn to pay attention the answers are always there if you know how to look."

Alice peered at the snapshots again and then asked the Jester. "How many images can your machine take in a minute?" The Jester smiled a broad smile 'Now you're asking the right question.'

"And the machine can learn the different patterns on each whale so it can identify them?"

"Exactly!" the Jester said.

"But why do we need to know about every single whale in that pod? Why do they have names?"

"They are an endangered group and when the machine learns how to measure their health –we can figure out the best way to support it."

"Ah, I can see how names would be useful" Alice felt like she was finding pieces of a puzzle "Tahlequah sounds like a made-up name." The Jester shook his head, "It's from the Lummi Nation in Canada. They see the whales as part of their family, so they work with us researchers to figure out when its best to reduce shipping noise in the sea, or even to give the whales food."

Amazing, Alice thought, but she had to stop getting side-tracked and focus on getting home.

Pulling back from the screen "Can your machines help me get home?" Alice asked the Jester.

"Maybe, maybe not," the Jester was back to working his machines and missed the look of dismay on Alice's face.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, machines take instructions from us, and it hasn't learned your voice patterns yet."

"Huh?"

"Everyone has a slightly different way of talking and the machine has to learn how you talk."

"And how long does that take?" sighed Alice.

"Well," said the Jester playfully "You have to think about it from the point of view of the machine. Its system is much less intricate than our brains. It will need lots of data from you – ideally along with data from other people who sound like you..."

Alice could feel herself tuning out. Grandma's African American, she thought, even at school people said Alice sometimes had a mild American lilt to her voice. But they were in England, and these were machines who understood English voices. This was hopeless.

"Isn't there anything else the machine can do to help me?"

The Jester cocked his head to one side.

"Well, there are portals."

"Portals?"

"You see those windows over there?"

Alice took in the three windows that were different to the rest in the lighthouse. She still couldn't see through them, but they had a violet hue. Each were marked with a different number from 1 to 3. "One of them will definitely get you home."

"What about the other two?"

The Jester shrugged.

"But surely you must know."

"That's science for you" the Jester said and turned back to his machines "always stepping into the great unknown – now, if you'll excuse me."

Alice instinctively reached for her necklace. It was a row of amber beads that she had worn all her life. Running her fingers along their smooth warm texture she thought to herself. I can do this. She reminded herself that she had remembered how to be safe when she fell into the canal and that she had figured out how to walk upside down. All she had to do was to pick a number between one and three. She looked at the windows carefully to see if there were any clues, when she saw number two had a white dot in the middle of the violet hue. It looked a bit like a star. Grandma had taught her about looking for the North Star to orient herself.

Without thinking, Alice opened the window to get a better look and found herself sucked through a vortex and into the sky. For a split second she thought that she might fall but seeing a Kingfisher flying next to her began to mimic its movements and together they flew.

"This is super cool!" Alice said to the Kingfisher.

"I know right."

"Where are we going?"

Alice followed on, ahead of them she could see a set of stars, symmetrical, shaped like a round ball and surrounded by what looked like a ring of diamonds.

"We're so far out" said the Kingfisher "that this galaxy hasn't got a name."

Grandma has shown Alice pictures of our own galaxy, the Milky Way, and this was different – it had a ring around it that was not at all connected to the stars.

Alice and the Kingfisher began to play a little dancing game.

I can't wait to tell Grandma about this Alice thought and at the thought of Grandma she remembered just how far away from home she was. She reached for her necklace, but it didn't feel the same – instead of fingers – Alice had little claws.

Alice screamed.

"Are you alright my friend"

"How am I flying?"

"Like a regular bat"

Alice screamed again.

"I don't want to be a bat!"

"I always thought bats were really cool – the only mammal evolved to fly. Bats can see with their ears and even live with mischievous microbes that make most other mammals really ill."

"Like a virus? Will I become sick if I turn back into a human?"

"Don't worry, your body will remember the adaptation and your immunity will be stronger."

"I want to be human again!"

"I thought you said flying was super cool."

"I did, but I've had enough now, and I just want to be me."

"What's so good about being you?"

Alice paused – she wasn't so sure. At first all she could think about, was everything that was wrong.

The Kingfisher was waiting and then it came to Alice – here she was flying around talking to a bird.

"I can talk to anyone" she said.

"I knew you were the friendly type when we met" the Kingfisher replied.

"And I'm adaptable – we had to move here because of Grandma's work at the Space Lab. I made lots of friends quickly in my new school."

The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to get back to being human and even do her chores at home.

"How am I going to get back?" she asked in a small voice.

"Well, I can help you – but you also have to help yourself. If you give the galaxy the right name – you'll get home. You only have three tries though."

In her excitement Alice thought she knew the answer to this one. It was simple – in Grandma's Space Lab – people gave their last name to a galaxy when they had discovered it.

"Rawlings" Alice said triumphantly and closed her eyes.

Nothing happened.

Nothing at all.

Alice slowly opened one eye and then the other, the Kingfisher was still there, they were still surrounded by the stars.

"Maybe," said the Kingfisher softly "you might want to give it more thought."

It struck Alice then that she had a huge feeling inside and it was one that she had had before. It was like walking through school after hours when no one else was around. The empty corridors echoing with the sound of unspoken voices.

There's a word for it, Alice thought. If I can only remember the word.

"Kenopsia" Alice hadn't meant to say it out loud.

As she did a loud booming sound emerged from the stars and the Kingfisher was gone.

Alone, Alice realised using the word had made it real and now she had only one more try.

"Learn to pay attention the answers are always there if you know how to look."

Taking a deep breath – Alice looked around the stars. Even alone she saw they were awesome and began to see how she could be awesome too. What could she call this place – how could she get...

"Alice!"

And with a loud thump Alice landed on the floor of the kitchen. The mop where she had left it, the sink still full of last night's dishes. She reached for her necklace and felt the smooth and warm amber stones. Jumping up, Alice had never felt so excited about getting to back to work. She looked on the kitchen counter for the list of things Grandma had asked her to do and saw right at the bottom where she hadn't cared to read – in Grandma's beautiful script, 'Thank you Alice – you're amazing and I love you.'



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