

## Alison in Wonderland

My bed is enormous. I am tiny.

‘Mummy!’ I shriek.

My voice is too small to be heard. My eyes feel as if they are being squeezed. I try to move: it’s impossible.

Everything is bigger: my dressing-table, my desk, my toys....

And then everything is normal. Except that my bedside clock says 7:04; an hour has passed that felt like five minutes. I run into Mummy’s room. Light is fluttering through the curtains and she’s sitting up in bed. I get in beside her and tell her what happened.

‘You were just dreaming, Alison.’ She puts her arm around me.

‘No,’ I say. But maybe I was? It felt real and not-real at the same time, like a good story as you’re reading it.

The next time, one of my arms is missing. I run to Mummy, screaming. She tells me I was dreaming and gives me Calpol for the bursting brightness inside my head.

Sometimes I am the size of a mouse. Sometimes I am enormous, as though I could reach out and touch the ceiling while lying in bed. Sometimes my head feels twice as big and sometimes as light as a feather. Once I think my left hand will drop off if I move it. Another time, my bedroom windows seem crooked and a girl is peering in.

It’s not just at home that these things happen. One time when we’re told to colour in at school, my colours are totally different to everyone else’s. Another time, my ruler becomes wavy and I can’t draw a line.

I don’t tell anyone except Mummy when a strange thing happens, but it’s all I think about. I clutch it in my hand in the classroom. I crunch it with my crisps at lunchtime.

The GP says there’s nothing wrong. I’ll ‘grow out of it’ and am ‘a very imaginative little girl’.

The optician says I have a problem with depth perception and need glasses. ‘Problem solved,’ Mummy says, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

During my Year 6 SATS maths test, I pass out. Everyone else gets five minutes of extra time, I get taken into the staff room. My hands feel so big I believe if I stretch them out, they will touch the far wall.

The GP is more concerned by now. I try to describe my warped, fish-eye experiences and get a referral. I am tested for brain lesions, fevers, other infectious diseases. Screened for schizophrenia. The tests are negative.

The school lets me take the exam again. I’m so frightened of fainting that I can’t concentrate. In the jitter and zing of starting secondary school, I learn that I’ve been placed in the bottom set for maths.

Mum takes out a loan so I can see a consultant neurologist privately. In a room pierced with sunlight, I am diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy. The neurologist says it could have happened as a side-effect of an infection that changed how much blood flowed to my head, affecting my visual processing.

‘We think Lewis Carroll had temporal lobe epilepsy,’ she says. ‘It’s also referred to as Alice in Wonderland syndrome.’

‘What’s the cure?’ Mum asks, as I shield my eyes from the stabbing light.

‘The symptoms usually disappear in adulthood.’

Adulthood is a different country, I think, walking back down the antiseptic corridor.

Aged sixteen, reality is still bleeding. Even with my diagnosis, the white-coated language cannot explain all the sensory-perception distortions. Often these are accompanied by migraines. I don't meet a doctor who has personally experienced what I have, who I think really understands, and I give up trying to explain what it's like to have the two sides of my brain arguing – one saying this is real, the other that it's the condition. The walls of the condition that are my world.

I go down a research rabbit-hole. I learn about destressing mechanisms and techniques, as stress can bring on the episodes of distorted perception and migraines. I do yoga, pilates, meditation, mindful colouring, cut out processed food and chocolate. While my peers are downing bottles of cheap wine in the park, I am drinking camomile tea in my bedroom while listening to a mindfulness app. I stop when the disembodied voice on the app grows louder without me controlling the volume. I stop yoga when my hands grow and the walls close in. I stop pilates when my legs become the legs of elephants, too big and heavy to lift.

My friends call me 'Away with the Fairies Alison'. They don't know about my condition. Only the teachers know, so that if they see me looking at them as if through the wrong end of a telescope they don't ask what the matter is in front of the whole class. That if I'm sitting at my desk when everyone else is packing up, it might be because time is stalling for me. That if I can't hear their lesson, it could be because the rain is fire-alarm loud or that music only I can hear is drowning out their voice.

I become best friends with a girl called Jackie. After believing I am watching myself on her TV, I tell her about my Alice in Wonderland syndrome. She is fascinated. It's so good to talk about it to someone my own age. The fainting is frightening, I say. The rest of the time it's like suddenly stepping into a film you're watching. Jackie swears not to tell anyone.

Two days' later, I walk into registration and everyone stops talking. Jackie doesn't look at me. Everyone else does. At lunchtime, noxious clumps of kids at every table are clearly whispering about me. I sit alone, trying to eat. A girl I have barely spoken to comes over and hands me a can of Diet Coke. I thank her, thinking she must feel sorry for me. Then I see the hand-written label with 'Drink Me' on it. A boy throws a chocolate bar with 'Eat Me' onto my table. As I rush out of the canteen, someone shouts: 'Oh dear! She shall be too late!'

By the time I start sixth form college, the delusions have lessened. I only get them when I'm very tired, stressed or excited. The same with the fainting and migraines.

I hope to make friends at college, because my social life is a sad and lonely region. It's hard to trust anyone after what happened with Jackie. I felt both too big and too small in my school after that. But my reputation precedes me. I don't get bullied at college, but am given a wide berth.

Just before half-term, Peter sits next to me in an English Language class.

'Who are you?' he asks. As I tell him my name, he stares at my lips.

We're told to work in partners on a project about child language acquisition. Peter asks if I want to come to his house at the weekend to do it.

As I am typing his address into my phone, my hands start to grow. I can't touch the screen or speak.

My phone falls and the screen cracks.

Peter picks up the phone and hands it to me. His blue eyes are big and kind.

Peter's living room has a chandelier, a grandfather clock, a gold-framed mirror and more photos that I have ever seen in one place. There are pictures of Peter and another boy getting steadily older in school uniforms; an elderly couple; family groups; wedding photos. Peter's smiling mum, the bride in the photos, has honey-blond hair and birthday-cake white nails. She comes in with a cafetiere and a plate of home-made biscuits on a tray.

'Lovely to meet you, Alison,' she says in a cashmere-soft voice.

As she pours the coffee into china cups, I look out of the sash window into a garden splayed with autumnal light. The electric-green grass is ringed with pristine pots with glossy flowers in them.

Peter's mum leaves and we start work. The discussion is challenging but fun, like skipping uphill. Every time I speak, he stares at my lips. I wish I'd bought a lipstick.

As we're deciding on whether to cite a particular theorist, a phone rings. It's not mine, but Peter doesn't seem aware of it. The ringing stops then starts again.

'Is that your phone?' I ask.

Peter walks over to a Welsh dresser as the ringing stops. He picks up a phone resting on a scalloped-edged plate. 'It was my brother,' he says. 'He's just started university. He'll call back, probably.'

'You didn't want to speak to him?' I address his back, as he's turned away to do something on the phone.

He clearly didn't hear what I said, so I repeat the question.

'I didn't know the phone was ringing,' he says. 'I keep mine where I can see it, but that's Mum's – she's always leaving it lying around.'

Is he hard of hearing?

'Want another coffee, Alison?' he asks.

As I pass my cup, our hands touch and it's as if he's returning my skin to myself like a gift.

We work for another hour, then Peter asks if I want to stay for lunch. He makes ham sandwiches with thick slices of seedy bread. I don't say that I normally avoid processed meat.

We eat in the garden. It's very different to the small, untidy courtyard where anything that Mum plants dies. Peter is so lucky, with his perfect garden and house and cashmere mum.

Our conversation skates along the surface: Netflix TV shows we like, teachers we don't. I want to touch him so much my fingers sizzle as though there are sparklers inside them.

I'm talking about how I want to get a dog – Mum has allergies but is coming round to the idea of one with hypoallergenic fur – when Peter kisses me. Softly at first, then harder.

When we move apart, I hear a helicopter whirring. There are two prisons in our city and I ask Peter, half-joking, if he thinks someone has escaped.

'Why would someone have escaped?'

'The helicopter,' I say.

'The helicopter?'

I can still hear it. Am I experiencing a variation of my symptoms? They've never extended to hearing, but what else explains it?

'Nothing,' I say, feeling a tightening around my temples.

Shortly after that, I throw a goodbye over my shoulder and leave.

The visual delusions get fewer. The migraines and fainting spells almost cease. I go to university in a far-away city and make friends. I tell those I am closest to that I suffer from Alice in Wonderland syndrome and there is only interest and concern. I graduate and stay on to do a Linguistics MA, working at a bar to support myself. I meet Kristian at the bar, and three years later we marry. A year after that, I try to work out if I'm happy but the feeling is as hard to pin down as a thought bubble. Three years after that, we're tied together like a toxic umbilical cord. We split up and he goes to live with the woman he's been seeing for the past two months. Aged twenty-nine and unable to afford our mortgage alone, I go back to my mum's while I work out what to do.

As I am shopping in the city centre, hair peeled back in a bun and wearing an old hoodie and baggy jeans, there is a tap on my shoulder.

'I thought it was you, Alison.' Peter's blue eyes are still kind. Meanwhile, embarrassment sits heavy as stage make-up on my face.

'I was meant to be meeting a candidate for a job interview,' he says, 'but they've just texted to say they've had another offer. Have you got time for a coffee?'

I look at his ringless left hand and, peeling the words off my rib cage, say I'd like that.

In bed in his studio flat, Peter tells me that I have been rattling around in his heart for ten years.

'Like old pennies and lint in a tumble dryer?' I ask, and he laughs.

'I never said anything, Alison, because I didn't think you were interested.'

'I would have been,' I say, 'but I didn't think I could measure up.'

'Why on earth not?'

'I thought I was too weird for you.'

'You? Too weird for me?' He laughs again. 'I thought I was too weird for you.'

'I thought you were perfect. You had the perfect house and garden, the perfect mother.'

After that day at his house, he'd asked whether anything was wrong, whether he'd done anything wrong. I said no. I said no when he asked me to come to his house again and no when he asked me to the cinema. He stopped asking. I squashed my feelings onto paper flat as my heart. Misery and loneliness germinated under my skin like mushrooms, but I reasoned it was better than him finding out what I was after I'd fallen for him even more.

'Perfect on the outside, maybe,' Peter says.

It's close to Bonfire Night, and there is the noise of fireworks from somewhere nearby.

'I love that sound,' I say.

'Gunfire?'

'Gunfire?'

I untangle my jumper from my bra and put it on, then open the curtains. Gold and silver light leaps into the sky.

'Oh, fireworks.' Peter grins. 'That makes more sense. Not much gunfire around these parts usually.'

'I suppose it could have been gunfire.'

'Everyone apart from an aphasiac would've known it was fireworks.'

'An aphasiac?'

'You do know I have auditory aphasia, don't you, Alison?' he says.

The start of understanding swoops low in my chest. 'How would I know that? I don't even know what that is.'

'I assumed that was why you basically ghosted me in college. I thought you didn't want to go out with the boy with the weird condition.'

'I thought you wouldn't want to go out with the girl with the weird condition.'

Silence. Then – 'Come back to bed, Alison.'

I get under the duvet with the blue and white star pattern and Peter draws me into his warm body. He tells me about a little boy who realised his hearing was different to other people's. He'd hear his mother's car engine and cry because he thought it was a lion roaring. He'd hear rain and think people were tapping at the window. At school, he mistook workmen drilling for the fire alarm and left the room: even the teachers laughed about that. The boy often misunderstood people's speech, and it helped to see their lips move but he was hit when someone thought he was looking inappropriately at his girlfriend. It took a long time to get a diagnosis of auditory aphasia, and although it was a relief it didn't stop the teasing.

I tell the story of a little girl who found herself in a world of distortions and perceptions. A little girl who drew herself away from a real world more frightening than her wonderland.

'I thought you'd be like all the kids at school when you found out,' I say.

'I thought you were like all the kids at school because you had found out,' he says.

Slowly, the narratives untwist. Then the talking stops, and there is only fireworks.