

Runner Up

Alice

Kate Twomey, Wellington Girls' College

It was the heat of the summer that drove us all mad.

Alice said she'd heard someone say it was the hottest summer in twenty five years. There was nothing to do but lie in the damp, stifling shade of the house, watching the clocks tick and taps drip. Outside, the garden withered and the maize fields swayed in the drowsy caress of a wonderland breeze.

Meals were a subdued affair of bowed heads and the heavy scrape of cutlery. At the head of the table, Alice's mother seemed to wilt like a dying rose beneath her rosary beads and crucifixes. Alice's head drooped and her sleepy, sooty eyes alternated between her mother's face and her plate.

Not even the orchard could withstand the sickening heat. The fruit on the trees ripened and swelled and rotted on the branches before we could gather our energy or baskets, and the orchard became stifling with the scent of sweet decay.

In the house, something seemed to be ripening, too - an awareness too great for the house to hold. Alice's weeping nights were punctuated with frequent trips to the maize fields where she would stand, limp, quivering, eyelids closed and fluttering, lost in her little lonely wonderland. In the afternoons I would sometimes see her mouth open, like a fish gaping for air. The house seemed to teeter, and I felt sure that if the awareness grew any further the place would flop dustily down like a playing card tower.

Alice kept a wary distance from me, and I revelled in her mistrust. The guest bedroom had a lock and key, and some nights I would hear her hot, trembling breath at my keyhole, then the dusty scrape of the key in the lock. The little girl who had held woodland tea parties and set nooses for white rabbits was long gone, but the tentative ghost she had become retained the childish belief that a locked door would keep problems at bay. As the heat grew, the clothes loosened on Alice's frame, and her fingers knotted in the hem of her dress or cupped the base of her stomach. The crucifixes seemed to blacken and the card walls drooped, and the ticking clocks must have spurred her to action.

Later, they asked me if I had seen her the night she ran away. I told them I hadn't, which increased their suspicion of me, because they took me in for questioning and searched the sticky, festering bloodbath of the orchard for clues. But there was little for them to go on beyond a whispered word of Alice's strangeness before she vanished, the tightness of her mouth and the restless quiver of her fingers.

The night she ran away, I had indeed caught a glimpse of her as she stood at the top of the stairs. Her face had held a dreamy, eerie expression which I cannot quite put into words, caught in a fractured second between madness and realization.

All that remains of her now is a photograph in the hallway. Paper and ink Alice with her dotted shoulder blades and stippled skin fails to fully capture the lost loveliness of the girl, her musky, powdery scent, weight pressed on one stockinged foot, teacup eyes half lidded in the moonlight.

It is important to note that she never made it to the city. Perhaps someday they'll find the imprint of her body on the side of a road, bleached bones cocooned around the cobweb soft skeleton of her unborn child. The funny thing is, the one question they never asked me was whether *I* had left the house that night.

Like I said, it was the heat that drove us all mad.