

## Al Fine / To the End

by Gaynor Jones

Papà's head has been removed from every photograph that lines the stairs. Alice's Nonna says it's easier that way, that the spirits get a stronger channel without any eyes watching. Alice flicks each gilded frame as she passes. Papà in a fedora and necktie, briefcase by his side. Papà at their old Hamptons pool in high waisted bathing shorts, scandalous without his tank top. Papà leaning on his Auburn Sedan, with Alice propped up on the bonnet.

Alice had once asked her Nonna, 'Why leave the pictures up at all?' Nonna lifted her black lace veil and nodded at the hallway, 'Caro, those frames are from Tiffany.'

Nonna wouldn't let a little thing like her only son's suicide get in the way of a display of ostentation.

The stairs creak. It is hard for Alice to be quiet with the weight of so many thoughts in her head. The sound stirs Valentino, who begins percussing on the walls of his tank, luminous claws unbound and outstretched.

'Alice! It's time.'

Alice glares at the lobster then continues her descent. She pauses at the last picture, the largest one. She holds two fingertips to her lips, then presses them to the black hole where Papà's head used to be. He hovers behind her on the stairs,

unseen, grasping for the kiss, but his translucent fingers hold no purchase and he fades.

Nonna has the planchette and pencil ready at the table. Alice drags an ornate chair up next to her, then places her fingers on the planchette as she has been shown.

‘Grazia, Valentino.’ Nonna blows a kiss towards the tank. Her beloved son tries to return the gesture, though it is futile to blow a kiss with no breath.

Papà bought the bright blue creature on vacation in `28. Drove him home from Portland splashing in a bucket on the floor of his car. At night, Alice holds on to the memory— Papà bronzed and laughing, bounding like a boy. Nonna squawking about water on the rug. Papà holding the lobster up to Nonna’s face, sending her reeling into the parlour. Then leaning down to Alice, ‘One in a million! A good luck charm, they say. Not that we need it, eh, mio amore?’

It wasn’t the most extravagant thing he’d spent their money on, but it was certainly the strangest.

On the day Papà died, Valentino lay completely still, dust covering his spiny legs. Nonna draped a dark blanket over his tank, said to let him mourn. After three weeks, just as Nonna had decided to remove him, Valentino jumped up and tapped and clicked on the glass. Nonna had followed the point of his claws to the planchette and decided it was a sign, that this lobster had a message for them. And from then on, whenever Valentino tapped, they tried to find a message.

The planchette begins its movements. A series of looping circles and squiggles begin and neither Nonna nor Alice claim them as their own. Nonna keeps her eyes closed. Her black, Clara Bow eyeshadow and long lashes give the impression of two dark, soulless eyes. Alice peeks to check that Nonna is fully immersed, then applies a little extra pressure.

‘They are with us today, Alice. Keep your eyes closed, we must not interrupt the spirits.’

Alice continues to push the planchette. She is well practised at it now. Each time scolding herself for keeping up the pretence. But it is the only time that Nonna brightens, no longer shrivelled by grief. Sometimes Alice thinks to steal Valentino away to the shore. But then her Nonna would come up with some other sign, some other story. Or worse, she would give up altogether.

Alice releases her hold on the planchette and waits a few moments. She likes to hear Nonna smiling.

‘Aha! You see, Alice! He is okay, your Papà, he is letting us know. He is okay.’

Alice traces her fingers over the spirals on the paper, letters corkscrewing one after the other. She’s getting better. The writing is clear today.

‘Bees knees.’

It was his favourite Americanism. He loved the nonsense of the language, so curt, so matter of fact. So unlike his sprawling Italian with its lingering phrases. He

would buzz at her whenever he said it, which was often: scooping her up on his return home from work, at the the soda fountain, flashing the notes in his wallet as he treated her friends. He said it when business was going well, but also when she questioned the newspaper headlines, when the Fabergés disappeared from the mantel, when their driveway was empty. And when he said goodbye for the last time. She could imagine him saying it, eyes wide and teeth flashing, right before he stepped onto the tracks.

Nonna smiles. When she moves, her back no longer arches and she touches her hair like a girl, deftly popping a grey curl back in place. Alice smiles back although she misses her Papà. Misses the smell of him. Cannoli and smoke and newspaper print. She needs to get away, before it spills out of her.

‘May I be excused, Nonna? I want to fix my hair.’

Nonna nods, she is already moving towards the garden, humming to herself.

Alice returns to the staircase, but pauses to give a little tap on Valentino’s tank. Her hand passes straight through her Papà, who is looking at Valentino. Valentino holds up a claw in solidarity, black beady eyes seeing what only he can see.

Bio - Gaynor Jones is a writer of micro, flash and short stories from Manchester, UK. She tweets at @jonzeywriter