

2011

Complications

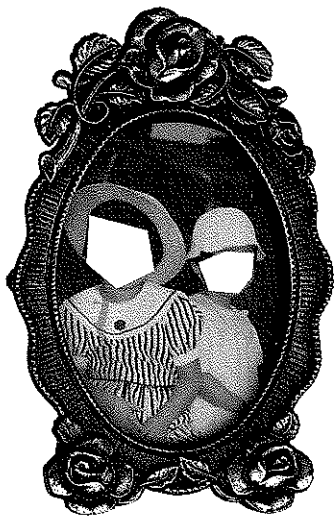
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Complications

SHORT STORY | Vahri McKenzie

My real name is Alice, but everyone calls me Lisbeth. A couple of years ago, late '99, my parents and I moved here, to Perth. On the strength of my academic record – a first-class honours in English and an incomplete PhD – I got a job in a good book store in Subiaco. The owner, Francine, is nice to me. I think she believes I fled Sydney with a broken heart.

'Lisbeth, who was that beautiful man you were talking to?'

A customer, no-one I really know.

'You know, Lisbeth, my Random House sales rep was asking about you the other day. Shall I say you're available?'

I shake my head and turn away as I feel the heat rush to my face. Lisbeth is cold, bookish, not interested in romance.

'Two years is long enough to sulk, Lisbeth.' Francine passes me a book from PSYCHOLOGY (with a silent POP) called *Learning to Love Again*, with a lengthy subtitle describing its target audience.

I'll look through it, and I add it to the pile in my satchel. Francine lets me take home any books I want to read and return. She picks a lot of them out herself.

'Oh, this is your area, Lisbeth,' referring to the incomplete PhD in Sydney.

Francine's got it wrong, though I haven't told her

so. We left Sydney because my sister died there, after complications while having a simple procedure under general anaesthetic. Her brain had a massive haemorrhage and she never woke up.

I'm nineteen but I could be older. I think it's because I'm tall. My sister was the same height and people often said how much I looked like her, despite the seven-year age difference. When she was alive I used to beg her to take me out with her friends. Sometimes she would and we'd have a good time. In retrospect, I guess she took me as often as she went out herself. I don't think she had many friends.

Once when I was seventeen, not long before she died, we were at a party together. We were sitting in a relatively quiet nook of a flashy Bondi apartment. She had a toothache and didn't feel like dancing. I was happy just to sit and watch the steady flow of the fiesta-ing crowd. Many sported unusual behaviour, like a garment that could be put on for the evening. I was familiar with filmic depictions of garrulous drunks and self-amused smokers. The public lovemaking and cocaine-dipped strawberries were an experiential bonus. My sister seemed unaware of her colourful surroundings until a man with blue hair sat next to her and offered to give her

reiki. He said he could see the pain in her bottom right jaw: toothache? He slurred heavily while he said this and leaned against her, smiling sweetly. She refused his offer but did ask him to remove his arm from her shoulders and so a conversation of sorts was struck up. Soon he noticed me and mimed a slapstick double-take. We talked of doppelgangers and toothache, extortionate dentists and impoverished students. He was washed away with the crowd but returned half an hour later to say, 'She's your little sister, right? She still gets your parents' health insurance? You could pretend to be her and go to the dentist for free!'

My sister laughed and I nodded my head eagerly. At seventeen I was still covered by Mum and Dad's insurance policy. And I was deeply flattered by the blue-haired man's enthusiasm for our close resemblance.

I've grown up a lot in the last two years but I still don't go out much. In Sydney I couldn't wait to move out of home, to study at university, to go out with people without worrying what my parents would think. Now I can do all of those things but they don't seem so important. I don't have many friends. Mum and Dad and I take turns to cook dinner, and most nights I read. Sometimes, since the move, I

get headaches and go to bed early.

'Wouldn't you like to go to uni so you could talk to other people about the things you read?' This is my dad. I know he's concerned about me but it's a rhetorical question. We both know I'm not ready for uni yet. 'You wouldn't have to study what your sister studied. You could do something entirely different ...'

My sister was clever. Academia came naturally to her and she had so many plans about books she would write, and how she would challenge things she didn't agree with, and who was going to give her a job. She lived alone in a small unit in Glebe. I'd go there a lot, sometimes just to watch her work. She was researching her thesis when I went there to tell her I'd made an appointment with a dentist.

There's no problem. Just say you're me.

She was holding her jaw when I told her and I knew she'd go. The pain had been affecting her study. She worked so hard but never had new clothes, while my part-time job afforded me the ability to indulge all my developing tastes. Now that I work for a living, pay board at home and still live very comfortably, I see that she was inspired but impractical. I can remember several occasions when she ate dinner at home for a week or so because she'd made large purchases before covering important things. Like spending five hundred dollars on books on her way to pay the month's rent. And several-hundred-dollars' worth of exotic goldfish for her aquarium, while incurring penalties on outstanding speeding fines. Dad would grumble and Mum would yell but they never sent her away, because the truth was that Mum did stuff like that all the time. She paid for petrol with cheques she knew would bounce and drove off with a squeal of the tyres, as if they might run out of the servo

waving a shotgun. Dad made friends with the bank manager and usually worked things out.

My sister grimaced through her thin fingers. 'Pretending to be you doesn't bother me. I just don't like dentists.'

I smiled.

Francine is late. Fortunately the store has been quiet.

'Is Francine here?' I shake my head and he holds out his hand. 'I'm Rob, the Random House sales rep. Do you want to see some books?'

I wish madly that by divine coincidence, Francine will walk in at this moment. But she does not and I sigh audibly. I'd love to see your books.

And now he blushes.

Rob stays for an hour and shows me how to place the order. We choose the books together, each commending the other's choices. Francine doesn't arrive until twelve and hardly hides that she'd contrived the situation. 'I'm so sorry I'm late, Lisbeth, it was unavoidable. *Thank you* for taking care of the order.' Smiling between her words.

She wants to know about Rob's visit, of course, so we go across the road after work. I'm not very forthcoming. She bounces in her chair as she stirs one, then another sachet of fake sugar into her latte. I know all about her divorce of the previous year and her recent fling with an older woman. 'You're not married or anything, are you? I mean, you'd tell me if I was pushing in the wrong direction, wouldn't you? Are you just shy, is that what it is? I didn't think there were any coy twenty-six-year-olds left!'

What can I say? Francine has been kind to me, but how would she feel if she knew she was paying me a full adult wage and didn't need to? How could I account for the seven years of experience that I - that she, Lisbeth - had missed? And there were the issues with the tax department in Sydney. Perhaps I could tell

her I lost my sister ...

Francine, I'm not ... It's not that. I guess I'm shy ... It's complicated.

It was midday when I told Mum and Dad about my sister's appointment, which was scheduled for two. I'd left it until the last moment to tell them to make it seem as if I were asking them, but also putting it too late to do anything about it if they disapproved. 'Why didn't she just ask us to pay for a dentist?'

I didn't think of that, I said at the time, but I bet my sister did.

It had only been a week or two since her most recent argument with Mum and Dad about her poor financial management. Poor financial management ran in the family but they were sick of bailing her out. Letters from the Australian Taxation Office addressed to 'A Morrison' (my dad's name is Alan) had been arriving with greater frequency. These were discussed in anxious whispers in Mum and Dad's bedroom after which they'd emerge, Mum with red eyes and Dad with a long face, and I'd studiously avoid asking questions. I found some of the letters in a box after the move. They'd bought property in the '80s and later, I was still a little kid, transferred it into the name of Alice Kieran Morrison. It took six years for the Australian Taxation Office to issue the debt notice for unpaid capital gains tax.

'This isn't what I had in mind when I told her she needs to be smarter with her money,' said Mum.

At half past three, my sister and I met at a coffee shop in Waverly, our agreed debriefing location. We were both wearing red and black and I remember feeling embarrassed, as if I'd deliberately matched her, like I did with friends at school. She appeared to notice neither red cheeks nor slacks.

Perhaps she was just too relieved: the dentist had given her something for the pain (something? 'He said what it was but I can't remember,' she'd mumbled), and there had been a cancellation so she could have her wisdom teeth removed the next day. 'What did Mum and Dad say?'

I shrugged. They're okay. Dad used his 'they're-ganging-up-on-me' voice but he didn't say we shouldn't do it.

'Now we'll have to remember that you can't go to that dentist.'

Dad's making dinner - pumpkin curry - and it's pretty good. He's improved over the couple of years we've shared the cooking, though he has a weakness for the cheap 'home gourmet' sauces advertised on television.

'You're home late,' says Mum, not quite managing, not wanting to disguise the note of reproach in her voice.

I'm sorry I didn't call. I went out for a coffee with Francine after work.

'Yes, we thought you must have.'

Mum shushes me and I realise my feet are involuntarily tap-tapping on the tiled kitchen floor.

This afternoon I nearly told Francine about - you know - Lisbeth.

'Alice!'

I said *nearly*, Mum! I know it's a serious matter.

Did they think of the money, when they discussed what to do after she died? I can't remember.

'We agreed it wasn't to be mentioned! It affects us all, and you promised you'd do your part, as you very well know!'

It's my turn to do the dishes but I go straight to the shower.

After Lisbeth and I met at the Waverly coffee shop I went home and washed my hair and ate dinner and washed the dishes and watched telly. I was

meant to go to the surgery after school the next day and drive her car back to Glebe, as she wasn't allowed to drive so soon after the general anaesthetic. I was excited: I had a licence but no car and I liked the idea that my big sister needed me, that she was older in years but couldn't really manage the things of the world without support, my support. She didn't get her licence until she was twenty-two and then our parents gave her a car which she wrecked. They weren't making the same mistake with me, even though I was clearly nothing like her.

When I got to the surgery Dad was there and panic filled my face. They must have found out, they must have called him. I hoped it wasn't too bad, what we'd done. Would he blame me? I hoped he would wear his usual long troubled forehead, which might make it okay: just another complication courtesy of his girls that he'd have to fix up. The door buzzed as I walked in and he turned around.

But it wasn't okay. When he saw me he cried out and grabbed me, 'They said you were gone! Where's your sister?' I could see people, the staff, gathered closely together behind Dad and they had this look on their faces. See the father, crazy with grief.

'I'm so sorry,' said one, and they shook their heads.

It only took me a moment to realise what had happened. Lisbeth had gone and when she died she was Alice. I looked at Dad and saw him recollect our conversation of the day before, the toothache, the insurance, and his eyes went hot and small but he recovered himself, his forehead even longer with the horror of it. I drove him to the hospital.

It was a cerebrovascular accident, a stroke, they said. Unusual in young women, but

not unheard of. There was nothing they could do. It was nothing to do with the surgery, which went like clockwork. They'd called an ambulance in as soon as they knew something was wrong but she'd died before it arrived.

Mum consulted a medical attorney. They would have to cut her open to find out exactly what caused the stroke; still then it was a matter of interpretation. Even if there were a case for negligence, the whole story would have to come out. Mum and Dad considered several versions of the whole story and in the end chose not to have an autopsy. There was a small and private funeral, which seemed appropriate given that my sister wasn't very sociable. Expedient decisions were made. It would just be easier, Mum and Dad decided, if we left things how they were: Alice Kieran Morrison died of complications following surgery and we three moved to Perth for a fresh start. And it's been okay, except for the headaches.

With a little manipulation on Francine's part, Rob and I go for a drink after work. I think Francine must have given him a primer because it seems he's trying too hard, you know, pussy-footing, but it gives me a kind of freedom. We're onto our second drinks when he says, 'So tell me something about yourself, Lisbeth. Anything you like.'

I picture her then, at the desk where she spent so much of her time. The telly is on but really I'm just watching her. She smiles at me, a half smile, the kind she specialised in.

It wasn't my fault.

I hesitate for no more than a moment. 'Well, everyone calls me Lisbeth, but my real name is Alice.'

I liked the idea that my big sister needed me, that she was older in years but couldn't really manage the things of the world without support, my support.