

HAZEL ATKINSON

Venus Rising

The sea just before sundown is alive with colour; the usual dark and rolling emptiness pales on the horizon, a lighter, brighter blue than the heavy clouds above, while all around gulls skim the surface. White surf glints as it kisses the shore, the sharp rocks.

These are the liminal moments; the edge lands. Alice is sat, knees pulled up to her chin; she watches as the last flashes of light dip and fade into the waves, which now swell black and bloated. Breathes in-out, in-out; the soothing suck and pull of the tide.

She walks back slowly, dragging her feet a little as she passes the old stone church, looks hopefully up the steps. The beeping from a battered Audi shocks her almost out of her skin, and as Father Bride drives past, one arm waving from an open window, she catches sight of her own pale face and wide, staring eyes in the shining metal. She rubs at the back of her jeans, hopes the stain where wet grass has soaked through is not too visible.

“Alice? Is that you?” Her mother’s voice as the door creaks open. She bustles into view, red-faced and a damp tea towel in her hand. “Where have you been? Tea’s almost out the oven.”

“Sorry. Just went for a walk.”

“Well get cleaned up. David’s coming round.”

Alice rolls her eyes. “Oh joy.”

Her mother shoots her a sharp look, tightens her grip on the tea towel. Her high cheeks deepen in colour. “Come on now. None of that.”

“How was your day, Ali?” David always talks with his mouth full. She can see the pulp of green broccoli stems crushed and churned beneath his molars as he turns in her direction, and wrinkles her nose.

“It’s Alice. And fine,” she corrects, short. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see her mother glaring. She ignores her, picks at the food on her plate. David, as usual, is oblivious and chunters on happily—“amazing potatoes, Moira”—as Alice feels her stomach tighten. She sighs.

“May I be excused? I’m not feeling well.”

“What? You’ve hardly touched your food.”

David lays a hand on her mother’s arm. “Let her go, Moira, she’s probably coming down with something. Lots of bugs going about at the moment. Means more for me anyway—seconds?”

Alice does not look at him as she stalks from the table.

As she lies in bed, she can hear a low murmuring and the occasional throaty giggle from the kitchen below. She stuffs a pillow over her head, tries to sleep.

“Bless me, father, for I have sinned.”

There are candles this evening; they line the church and cast a soft glow over the pews, the altar, the red-brown wood of the confessional box. She can feel the light dancing across her cheek as she turns her head this way and that, and wonders if it makes her look pretty.

“Alice, this is the fourth time this week. It really isn’t necessary for you to confess so often.”

She pauses.

“You can’t call me Alice. This is an anonymous confession. Else what’d be the point of the screen?”

She can hear the smile in his reply. “Very well then. Regale me with your latest transgressions.”

Later, he lets her sit with a cup of strong cocoa as he prepares for evening mass. She watches him, quiet. Then—“So what do you think I should do?”

He is surprised. “Do? Whatever do you mean? Try and accept

this David, I suppose. For your mother's sake. And your own."

"But she's married still."

"Well, in the eyes of the church, yes—but you know that cannot be undone."

"In God's eyes," she retorts. "And mine. Do you believe in God?"

Father Bride laughs, and the sound echoes around the vaulted room. "Alice, I'm a priest!"

Serious. "But do you?"

He stops laughing, and looks at her. Properly looks, so that she can see his wide, ink-dark pupils, the golden flecks in his brown eyes; he seems suddenly very young. "Yes, Alice. Yes, I do."

She looks down. "So do I."

"But," he continues, slowly, "I also believe that He would want you and your mother to be happy. Whether that is with your father or, if that is no longer possible, with someone else. Love is strange, you know. It does not always work in the ways that you might expect."

Alice fingers her mug. She is not convinced. "Okay. I will try."

"Good girl." He stretches. "Now, I'd better go tend to the masses—are you staying for the service?"

"Yes. I always do."

There is a shimmering from the many lights which circle his head as he stands, greets people from the altar. If Alice squints, it becomes quite clear to her that Father Bride has a halo.

"Why did you become a priest, Father?"

Father Bride looks up at her from where he is crouched, hacking away at a wilting rose bush with a pair of old metal pliers. A thin sheen of sweat coats his forehead. "Do you know, I'm not sure. Why do men do anything? He laughs. "And no need to call me Father here, makes me sound like an old man doesn't it—all grey-haired and infirmity. It's Niall."

"Niall," Alice tests; her mouth makes a small moue as if the name ended in a kiss. She isn't sure.

"I had originally planned to study Law, but when it came round to it...I don't know. Somehow I was called from the bar to the seminary. And my father approves. The things we do, to make our parents happy."

“Hmmm.”

He smiles again. “I enjoy it too. And of course—” He sweeps his arm back, gestures to the rectory at the top of the lawn “—they gave me a house. Even if it does mean having to trim these ghastly bushes—I was not blessed with the green thumb. Here, you can give me a hand.”

She crouches down beside him, gingerly bends back the branches for him to snip.

“Careful, their thorns are sharp.”

She is being careful. “Perhaps one prick will put me to sleep for a thousand years.”

“I am sure a handsome prince would find you within minutes.”

She giggles, then—“Ouch!”

“I told you—is it bleeding? I’ve got a plaster here.”

Alice looks down at her thumb. She squeezes and a bead of blood bubbles up.

“Yes.”

“Come here.” He fusses over her, rests one hand on her leg as he wraps the bandage round. “Feeling tired?” He does not move his hand from her thigh.

“Not at all.”

He hesitates for a moment and then, standing up—“Well, let it never be said that I endorse slave labour. Cup of tea?”

The Virgin Mary is staring at her. Alice stares back, pokes out her tongue as she concentrates on capturing the jut of the statuette’s jaw. It is almost arrogant she thinks: ‘not good enough’ its tilt seems to say. It is right, of course. Alice grits her teeth in frustration, screws the paper into a tiny ball and hurls it across the room. It nestles comfortably on the growing pile in her waste-paper basket.

“Alice?” Her mother’s voice floats up the stairs. “Are you in there?”

She sighs, slams the sketch pad down. “I’m busy!”

“Don’t take that tone with me! I’ve left dinner for you in the fridge, I’m off to work—I’ll probably be home by about eleven. Remember to put the cat out.”

Alice does not reply. She hears the click of the front door, and the familiar, pained sound of the old car’s engine as it tries to start.

VENUS RISING

She closes her eyes. It isn't working, no matter which way and that she turns the wooden model the edges are still too hard, too cloaked in cloth. She thinks of the way the sea looked from the headland; the gentle, rounding waves: a mother's swollen belly. She stands up, pads over to the mirror hanging from the door of her wardrobe and presses a hand to her own stomach. Her image stares back. The light is dying now, the room filled with a soft orange glow as the streetlight outside flickers into life. Slowly, she unbuttons her blouse, watches in the glass as it peels from her skin. Her bra pushes up her breasts, she can feel the wire digging into her ribs below and when she removes it there is a small red imprint, a groove left that she can trace with her little finger. Gently, she brushes her fingertips over her torso, feels the rise and curve of her flesh. There is a strange feeling running through her, blood pulsing along shallow veins; she wonders what it would be like to have someone else's hands trace the contours of her body, to press their lips to that little indent. She remembers walking in on Seán O'Neill and Rhona Halliday in the girls' toilets—the bared, ghostly skin with that smell of sweat and cheap perfume, the nausea she had felt and Rhona's neck all the next week covered with a scarf to hide the deep purple flowers which blossomed over it. Then she thinks of Father Bride and the warm, solid weight of his hand on her right leg, left for just a moment too long, the slight excitement she feels as she sits in Confession, her breath and his on either side of the thin gauze. She feels a pang of guilt, the Immaculate Conception's painted eyes watching in silent reproach. Hastily, she whispers a quick 'Ave Maria' and places the Blessed Virgin face down on her bedside table before returning to the mirror. Then carefully, never taking her eyes from her reflection, Alice lifts up a pencil and begins to draw.

She knows she should be at home. David is round again (she has a suspicion that he may have stayed the night) and so this would be a prime opportunity for her to carry out her promise to Father Bride, but she can't. She feels too hot inside, too cramped, with a restlessness to her hands and feet. His voice grates on her.

"Where are you off to then?"

She jumps. Father Bride in the flesh is standing in front of her,

grinning like the Devil. For a moment she wonders uneasily whether her thoughts had somehow summoned him, if he could read her guilty mind.

“Just down to the coast.”

“That’s quite a walk!”

She shrugs, taps the leather folio under her arm. “I have some sketches to finish.”

His eyes twinkle down at her. “Ah yes, our resident artist. And I hear you’re away to study soon?”

“Yes, Dublin.”

“Wonderful city—I was born there myself, you know. We’ll miss you here, of course.”

“Will you?” Curiously. He meets her frank gaze for a moment and she sees a slight shift, his dark pupils twitch and widen, before he drops his eyes and clears his throat awkwardly, gestures at the pile. “Mind if I have a look?”

“I—no, of course.” She heaves the heavy bundle into his arms, watches carefully as he turns over the leather bindings. His face deepens in colour as he stares down at the sketches.

“I haven’t got the sea quite right yet,” she says, softly. “I need it to flow better around her legs.”

“They look quite—” Father Bride coughs “—quite lovely to me. Although to my knowledge it was Cyprus that Venus came ashore, not Ireland. I fear she’d have been rather cold in these waters.”

Alice smiles. “Perhaps.” Her arms feel empty, exposed; she smooths down her dress, lingering a little on the curves she knows he is admiring on paper. She remembers how hard her hip bone had been to get right, the shadows it had thrown as she twisted this way and that in front of her bedroom mirror.

“Well, I mustn’t keep you. When the muse calls and all that! I was planning a drive that way myself later so perhaps you will have to find a place for me in your work, though I’m afraid I wouldn’t cut quite the same figure rising from the waves.”

He chuckles a little self-consciously and she smiles back, watching as he disappears into the church.

The sea is rippling today, pooling over the pebbles on the shore too

fast for her pencil to catch. The light is all wrong as well, too dark somehow, none of those bright shafts of sun she needs to dance over the surface, reflecting upwards. She sighs in frustration, wraps her work up once more. She can hear the sea whispering; there are little pulling, hissing noises as it works its way towards her. Looking around, it is clear there is no one else in sight. And so, hesitantly, she takes off her jumper. There is a slight wind that raises the fine hairs on her arms, covers her in gooseflesh. She pauses for a second and then, in one fluid motion, pulls her dress over her head and runs down, down the beach and into the water. It hits her like a punch in the chest and she gasps, forces herself to keep going one stroke at a time until the pain becomes a comfortable numbness and her limbs relax.

She lies back, feels the cold climbing up to the roots of her hair, her scalp; buoyed up on the gentle waves. Her ears dip below the water and the world beneath is very quiet, very low. She closes her eyes, breathes as the sea swells under her.

Then, through the muffled silence—“Alice!”

She blinks.

“Alice!” Sits up, eyes wide. A figure stands on the shore, hitching up dark robes, wading forward. She opens her mouth in surprise and immediately water floods in, a sharp shock at the back of her throat and she splutters, coughs as her head is submerged. She rises, gasps, the sea stinging her eyes, and she struggles to stay upright as another wave crashes over her.

Then she feels strong hands on her arm, around her waist, something pulling her forward and she rubs at her face in an effort to see, kicks her legs as she is dragged through the deep.

“It’s alright, I’ve got you.” A soft voice in her ear as her feet find solid ground and she stumbles. Father Bride does not let go of her, but guides her out of the surf and onto the dry land, lowers her down onto the pebbled beach. She coughs.

“Are you alright?” He still has hold of her waist. She works for a moment, tries to speak; her throat is raw.

“I was fine, you surprised me! I was—just swimming.”

He tightens his grip. “Alice, look at the weather!”

She looks. The waves are rising now and falling hard, angry

beneath the dark clouds. Further out she can see the beginnings of rain.

“It wasn’t like that when I went out,” she says in a small voice. “I’m sorry, Father.”

He gapes.

“You little fool!” But his tone is gentle. “And I told you to call me Niall.”

The brine has gone from her lungs; she feels breathless, baptized—Christ born again in the arms of John the Baptist. She can count each droplet on his face.

And then, he kisses her.

There is salt still clinging to their lips from the water, she can taste it, and the slow, warm, wet makes her think of oysters, shellfish; small bodies turning restless in their hard casing. The damp sea smell. She can feel his breath quickening, oxygen pulling deep, deep into open lungs and his fingers on her skin like seaweed, slick and soft and winding and then—“Shit. Jesus, Alice. I’m sorry. I don’t know what came—you’re a child! And I’m—I’m sorry. Shit.”

Small patches of cold on her bare mouth and body as the breeze hits them. She shivers. His eyes on her, wide and black.

“I’m sorry. Oh God—”

“You oughtn’t blaspheme,” she says, quietly. Her voice seems to come from somewhere very far away; it blows through her. “Not on my account.”

He stares. Her bones feel hollow.

“I should take you home.”

Alice gazes out of the open window while tall hedgerows fly past in strips and blurs of green. Every so often Father Bride groans a little as if she cannot hear him, grips the steering wheel with white knuckles. By the post office she says without looking at him: “I’m not, you know. A child.” It is not an attempt at persuasion, but she feels it would be remiss not to point it out. He does not reply.

When she steps from the car, some one hundred yards from her front door, he leans out anxiously, tries to read her face. She shivers a little, hair damp and cold on her neck.

“You won’t—” His sentence hangs in the air, apprehensive. She shakes her head: who would I tell?

“Thanks for the ride home.”

A curt nod. The window rolls up; a confessional screen. She turns slowly on her heel and walks up the cobbled lane.

Her period starts that evening, the bright blood staining white linen like an admission. She smears a small, red cross on her pale thigh, thinks of Jesus strung up on that Holy Land wood, the sharp pain as thorns tightened around his scalp; her mother and father, hands nailed together in the sanctity of their marriage and wounds gaping as they try to pull free; Father Bride—Niall—pinned to a church door by the penitential stake. She shudders. Runs herself a bath and watches as the blood and sin are washed down the drain and out, out into the sea.

Wrapped in a clean dressing gown, Alice trips downstairs. The salt is gone from her hair, her skin, but she can still feel that soft, warm pressure on her lips and she raises a finger to them, wonders if it shows. There are voices on the other side of the door and as she makes to push it open, she catches her name. She slows, listens for a moment.

“I know, I know.” She can hear her mother. “But she’s so strange at the moment, so silent. Always in her own head, or church—she probably tells that nice young priest more about her life than she does me! And she’ll be leaving for college soon—I wanted to make the most of her this summer, but how can I when she’s never here?”

Alice feels a twinge of guilt as David makes soothing noises.

“There now, love. You mustn’t worry. She’s not a kid anymore, it’s perfectly natural that she should want her own life. And from what I can see there’s nothing wrong with her—just keeps herself to herself does our Alice.”

There is a long pause. Then, quietly, so quietly that she has to strain to catch it—“I feel like a bad mother.”

There is a small ache growing in Alice’s belly; it weighs heavy and hot. She wants to stop listening, to run back up to her room, but she knows that the noise from the stairs will give her away. So

she stays, hears David admonishing: “Don’t be ridiculous Moira, you’re fantastic to her. Come on now, you’re just tired. You’ve been working far too hard.”

“I can’t help it, I just worry that, ever since Michael and I... separated—she just never speaks of it. Doesn’t ask me a thing, not even when I drive her down to Dublin to drop her off for the weekend. God knows how she’s feeling—I don’t even know what he’s said to her about the whole business. It’s hard enough getting him on the phone for five minutes as it is. And then work has been so hectic—”

“Shhh. Hush now. Come here.” David interrupts. Then she hears small, soft noises—gentle lips on tender skin—and a hiccuping sob. It had not occurred to her that a parent could cry.

Slowly, very slowly, she raises herself from her position by the door and creeps, one foot after another, up the stairs. She stares at herself in the bathroom mirror, her dark hair and long nose. She narrows her eyes and her face blurs a little, the features out of focus. For a second, she could be looking at her mother. The dull ache in her stomach intensifies.

On Friday she wears her shortest skirt to church. She can feel it tightening around the top of her legs as she sits in the pew, the slight strain of her thighs against it as she stands for the psalms. She knows that Father Bride is looking and smiles, beatific.

After, as she makes to file out of the door with the rest of the congregation, he catches her arm.

“Alice, can I have a word?”

There is something in his gaze as he looks at her that she recognizes, a mixture of guilt and desire; David’s hungry eyes as he watched Bathsheba bathe.

“I’m sorry,” she says, placidly. “I’m expected at home. Maybe another time?”

She pulls free and sways down the steps leaving him standing in the doorway; a thin exclamation mark, radiating heat.

Her mother is waiting for her in the kitchen.

“Are you ready? I’ve got the afternoon off to drive you over to your Dad’s.”

Alice looks at her. There are fine lines across her forehead, at the corners of her mouth and hollows below her sharp cheekbones. She looks old, Alice realises suddenly, and tired. She remembers that quiet, defeated tone—"I feel like a bad mother"—and hesitates.

"Well, seeing as I'm going down to live there in a week I thought—?"

She feels almost shy. Her mother's eyes brighten.

"I mean, if it's not a bother," she adds hastily. "I don't want to be in the way."

But her mother is beaming. "Not a bother at all, but best give Dad a ring and let him know."

Spontaneously, Alice leans over and kisses her on the cheek. "Okay."

They spend the afternoon baking bread and listening to the radio; Alice thinks of Father Bride as she kneads, a pleasurable warmth oozing someplace below her stomach every time she slams her knuckles into the soft dough.

Later, she wonders whether she ought to have stayed. What he would have said. The "I want you I want you I want—" each another blow of the hammer to drive that stake home. Or something gentler perhaps, more apologetic. Her own quiet certainty: "I'm not, you know. A child." And she's not, she's not, and yet—The Virgin eyes her and she squirms under the gaze.

It is early, when Alice slips out of the back gate and up the road. Quiet too, only the faint rustling of the hedgerows as she passes and her own, certain footsteps. The air tastes fresh, clean; the way it does at the turning of a season. She swings over the low wooden gate and strides up the hill, feels the grass damp with dew below her feet and takes off her shoes, digging in her toes. From the crest the sea pools out before her, open and aching. She sits, mute, watches as it shivers and shudders below in the soft breeze. And then, or so it seems, the moving creature gives a great, moaning sigh and gently splits, giving way to rolling pink rays of light which swim across the sky and surface as dawn breaks from its dark belly. Something stirring in her own, a sudden small pang of grief and a hot lump in her throat as she adjusts to the beauty, but she does not look away until all that pink

and gold has been painted over by a bright, cloudless blue and when she walks home it is to the singing of the morning birds.

Her mother is waiting with a suitcase by the door. She runs a hand through her hair, and her voice wobbles a little.

“I just can’t believe you’re really leaving.”

“I’ll be back for Christmas!”

“Oh I know, but—”

David helps to heave her bags to the car.

“Alright, kid, you take care now. Give us a ring this evening.” He pulls her in for an awkward, one-armed hug. She nods, polite.

As they drive along, the car rattling under the weight of half her life, she spots Father Bride ushering in the congregation from outside the church. Impulsively, she leans out of the window and blows him a kiss, a strange, satisfied feeling creeping over her as she sees his face redden. Sitting back, she smiles to herself. Later, he will find the small statue of the Virgin that she has left, wrapped in red ribbon in place of the Bible she’s taken from the slot behind her usual seat in the front pew. He will only half understand that it is well meant, but will keep it in the confessional box anyway to be what he considers a necessary, uncomfortable reminder. More and more frequently, his eyes are drawn to Our Lady’s subtle, swelling curves, the teasing glint in her eye. He wonders if he needs a holiday.

Forty miles away, Alice laughs as her mother begins to hum ‘The Rocky Road to Dublin’ and the land peels back.