

# ANTICIPATION

And Other Dark and Bizarre Tales by

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**Leia Machado**

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**Joe Townsel**



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# Anticipation

*Joe Townsel*

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“Are we there yet?”

A question posed by anxious children and annoying adults trying to make the best of a long tedious trip.

This day, the inquiry had been uttered by Alicia, an eight-year-old more impatient than even most her age. The question had been asked for the third time during a four-hour drive. Her father’s own patience was rapidly diminishing after providing an answer twice before. There was, after all, only one answer: “If the car is still in motion, we haven’t arrived at our final destination.”

“Daddy, are we there yet?”

A subtle warning glance from his wife, Alicia’s mother, reminded him to call upon his patience once more. Providing reassurance to their daughter outweighed his own frustrations, exacerbated by this horrible Los Angeles traffic.

“No, sweetheart,” he replied through gritted teeth. “Not just yet. Soon.”

“But I want to be there now!”

Mommy stepped in, seeing that Daddy had just about reached his limit.

“Just a little while longer Lovebug. You and Mickey Mouse just need to wait a little while longer.”

What Mommy and Daddy didn’t know, of course, is that Alicia didn’t have to wait at all. Not a while longer, not one more minute even.

For as long as she could remember, Alicia could “fast forward” to specific events in her future. She couldn’t explain it, nor would she want to. She might get in trouble for using this neat power!

It worked like this: She simply closed her eyes to immediately proceed to a chosen moment yet to come. If she got tired of a cold, all she had to do was close her eyes, think or whisper to herself, “Fast Forward to when my cold is gone.” She would open her eyes, and find that two or three days had passed, with this cold now a memory. And it was a

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memory. She had full knowledge of what had occurred during the time through which she “fast forwarded.” But at least this way, she didn’t have to endure it in real time.

This day, her child mind told her the remaining drive to Disneyland would take forever. Her “too grown-up for her own good” mind reminded her that it would be only another hour or so, tops.

No matter. She had just about decided to skip over that hour of her life to arrive at the Happiest Place on Earth in mere moments.

But there was always a little hesitation before taking such a leap, no matter how brief. She remembered another time when her grandfather (Daddy’s daddy) came to visit. The old man gave her the creeps (she could never figure out exactly why; he just did.) He had planned to stay for a week. An eternity to a seven-year-old enduring such an unpleasant visit.

“Take me to when Grandpa leaves and this visit is over.”

She had closed her eyes, and whispered this to herself. What she didn’t anticipate is that the leap would skip over three full weeks of her life. Grandpa’s departure from their home had been delayed when he fell and hurt himself. Mommy had to take time off from work for those extra two weeks and take care of him until he was able to go back to his own house.

The three-week “fast forward” was the longest she had ever experienced. When she opened her eyes, her nose was bleeding and sudden sharp pain filled her head. Later in life, she would describe it to herself as being pierced by a thousand needles simultaneously, excruciatingly deep.

She almost instinctively called out to her Mommy. But she might want to take her to the emergency room. What if Mommy and the doctor asked questions about how she hurt herself, and forced her to reveal this neat, secret power she had?

She kept quiet, and went to the bathroom and tended to her nosebleed herself, carefully flushing the incriminating soiled tissue and disposing of all evidence. After several minutes, her headache faded.

Was the three-week fast forward, and the resulting nosebleed and headache worth it? Absolutely. She had full memory of those two missed

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weeks, and Grandpa had been a real jerk to her Mommy and Daddy the whole time!

That was a very long leap too! Since then, Alicia had been careful to avoid skipping over more than a few days at a time. Sometimes, it would be longer than she had anticipated, and a few times, the nosebleeds and headaches came back. But not too much.

And today, she would be skipping only an hour or so. Piece of cake! And after a few seconds, she'd be entering the gates of Disneyland to see Mickey!

The little devil on her shoulder told her to go for it!

She closed her eyes.

"Take me to when we get to Disneyland," she thought to herself.

When Alicia opened her eyes, she wasn't at Disneyland.

Not even close.

No nosebleed or headache this time. Only a half hour had passed.

She wasn't hurt. Not that she could tell. A paramedic had his arm around her. Daddy was a few feet away, sitting on the shoulder of the highway, sobbing uncontrollably. She looked the other way, and saw their car, engulfed in flames.

She screamed then. The fireman's grip tightened, but Daddy never even looked up. Alicia couldn't see her, but as the horrible memory of the missed 30 minutes came rushing into her mind, she knew Mommy had been trapped in the car after the accident and had burned to death. For as long as she lived, Alicia would never forget the agonized screams of her mother as the fire tore into her body.

It would be much later when Alicia would realize the full implication of this tragedy. Wishing to fast forward to a desired future event wouldn't work if that event never occurred. She would find herself suddenly thrust into the experience which occurred instead. She already knew that an unexpectedly long leap ahead could be very painful physically. But this was a new consequence; one she experienced that horrible day for the first time.

But it wouldn't be the last.

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Alicia's Daddy wasted little time before exposing her to his new girlfriend. Or maybe she wasn't new. When Mommy was still alive, Alicia heard her argue with Daddy many times when they thought she was asleep. Alicia remembered hearing this woman's name before. Maybe she was one of the reasons her parents argued.

Daddy brought her around for the first time only a few months after the accident. Alicia endured the first visit in real time, but none of the visits since. The rest, she simply fast forwarded through. At first, it was easy because she had to skip over only a few hours' time. Later, it got harder when Daddy's girlfriend stayed overnight, or for an entire weekend. Sometimes, the headaches and nosebleeds were so severe, she thought she would die, but it was worth it just to not have to spend any real time with this bitch who caused problems for her family.

It continued like this for months. Alicia found herself skipping over entire events in her life, as one would skip a chapter in a book.

She hated this woman. Daddy insisted she attend Alicia's ninth birthday party, and later Christmas. These were Alicia's two favorite days of the year, and ordinarily, she would never dream of fast forwarding through them. But for this year, this horrible year, her birthday and Christmas would be only memories of occasions she didn't actually experience. And these memories always came with the expense of an agonizing headache and nosebleed.

But soon, it would become impossible for Alicia to fast forward past her time with Daddy's girlfriend.

They came to her one day. Her Daddy always looked tired now, and how did she hear a friend of his put it? "Beaten down." Alicia felt sick to her stomach when they approached her, because a few of her friends had been through the same thing after their parents had been widowed or divorced. Now nine, Alicia could almost recite the announcement she was about to hear.

Her Daddy put his hand on her shoulder while his girlfriend stood back.

"Sweetheart, I have some very good news. For all of us."

"Don't marry her Daddy! She's a bad person who makes us both unhappy!"

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Daddy was stunned, expecting some resistance but not such simple truth coming from his nine-year-old daughter.

Daddy's girlfriend (fiancée) stiffened, her eyes burning with contempt for this little brat who would become her stepdaughter.

"Alicia, that's no way to talk! You apologize right now!"

Her Daddy's tone didn't match his words. He was a man who knew he was about to make a terrible mistake, and somehow, couldn't bring himself to prevent it.

"Babe, let me have a few minutes with Alicia."

Alicia was shocked as her Daddy simply nodded, and slunk away. There was no longer any question of who was in charge. Once Daddy left the room, his new fiancée turned to Alicia, put her hands on Alicia's upper arms, and squeezed. Hard.

"Listen to me you little brat," she whispered to Alicia through gritted teeth. "Your father and I are getting married and that's all there is to it. Just remember your place in this family, and we'll have no problems."

She squeezed harder.

"But I'm warning you right now. Cause problems for me, and you will suffer. Got it?"

Alicia closed her eyes.

"Take me to ..."

But take her to when? Any point in time, any future event, that she could anticipate in these crucial seconds, could deposit her days, months, or even years into her own future within seconds. The memories of the life she lived in between would come crashing into her head, and could have the physical impact of a sledgehammer.

"I said, do you understand me Alicia?"

Alicia opened her eyes, and nodded slowly.

"Good." The woman, already the proverbial wicked stepmother, released her grip. She turned to leave Alicia's room, but stopped at the door. She produced a thin smile, with no humor or good will behind it.

"I'm so happy I'm going to be your new mother Alicia. And I'll make your Daddy very happy too. Just wait and see."

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The woman left her room. And, of course, Alicia was anything but reassured. She could hear their voices in the other room, but knew the words were meaningless and tuned them out.

Alicia knew her days of a happy home life, and in many ways her childhood, were now over. Even though she couldn't risk using her power today, she would use it many times going forward.

The years passed, and the quality of life for all of them diminished as expected. Her stepmother ruled the house, but of course, was the most miserable one of all. And misery loves company.

Alicia continued to use her power to fast forward, over periods of time unpleasant, tedious or inconvenient. Sometimes, the headaches and nosebleeds seemed a little severe for a short jump, but the pain always abated quickly. It was worth the fleeting agony so she could escape from reality when necessary.

In the weeks leading up to her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, Alicia continued to watch helplessly as her father got old before his time. The marriage, based on lies from the beginning, had deteriorated further so that all intimacy, physical and otherwise, has been replaced with unrelenting hostility and resentment. They were strangers, living apart under one roof, with all pretense of family long forgotten.

Other family members and friends suggested, then pleaded, with her father to leave his wife; to take his daughter and begin again. The concern was gradually replaced with reluctant acceptance and futility, because it was a simple fact of life that you just can't help someone who won't help themselves.

His father, her grandfather, never gave up trying to “knock some sense” into his head about this highly destructive and volatile marriage. But it was the ramblings of an old man, consumed by pride, that also fell on the deaf ears of his son. The ramblings stopped two years prior with the death of her grandfather. (Since her grandfather's unwelcome attentions only intensified as she grew older, Alicia was not sorry to see him kick the bucket.)

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So now, her father's only friend seemed to be alcohol and his only savior the local bartender. She suspected his use of other recreational drugs as well. The latter was the only remaining activity he and his wife would occasionally enjoy together.

Alicia anticipated her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday as just another day from which she would seek escape through fast forwarding her life. There has been no mention of it from either her father or stepmother.

One night, Alicia was hiding in her room when another screaming match began. Since the arguments were now very frequent, and since she had become accustomed to them, her choice of escape was usually just turning up the volume on her radio. She didn't feel the need to fast forward through what was a nightly event.

This night, Alicia was unable to drown out the shouting, no matter how loud her music was. Could it be that her father had finally had enough and was ready to leave her? Unlikely, but this argument was particularly vicious. As it continued, she could make out the slurring of her father's rants, no doubt the result of another alcoholic binge. Twice, something was dropped or thrown to break, and Alicia almost went to investigate, but the shouting would resume and she would retreat back to her bed.

Eventually, it was over and Alicia tried to go to sleep to find some peace at least for a few hours.

This would be a costly mistake, letting her guard down.

Alicia was only half-awake when the silhouette of her father appeared in her doorway. She didn't know if her stepmother was in the house, but she sometimes left for the night after such a knock-down, drag-out if her father didn't.

Her instincts told Alicia that she and her father were alone in the house. Typically, this would make her feel more secure. Not this time.

"You look so much like your mother."

Before, this would have warmed her heart. Now, she only felt cold and was fighting sudden feelings of revulsion. It was not her father standing in the doorway.

Sensing her fear, Alicia's daddy came into the room and sat on the bed. Alicia withdrew instinctively.

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“Sweet Sixteen,” he whispered. Each syllable produced the stench of cheap alcohol. She was cornered, in her own bed, and they both knew it.

Then, in a moment she may have imagined, he spoke to his daughter for the last time as a sane man.

“If I can’t have it from her, I’ll have to take it from you Alicia. I’m sorry.”

Alicia closed her eyes, so tightly it felt as though her eyelids were fused together. In that moment, the real object of her hatred became undeniably clear. As crystal. It was not her grandfather she hated. It was not her stepmother. It was him! Daddy!

For a moment too brief to measure, Alicia considered the consequences. How many years would pass in mere seconds? How many memories of events she didn’t experience would come crashing into her mind? Could she stand the pain?

She didn’t know the answers to the first two questions, but she had no doubt as to the third. Yes, she could stand the pain. It would pale next to the pain she had experienced; to the pain she was experiencing right now.

Her father was on her now, and there was no other escape. Not from this, not from the future abuse she knew was to come.

Alicia closed her eyes even tighter, and thought to herself:

“Take me to when my daddy is dead.”

Alicia opened her eyes.

For a very brief moment, nothing.

Then, exquisite agony.

She was on her hands and knees on a hard concrete floor. This was all she could determine at first. The world around her was a blur. Had her eyesight deteriorated in the time she had skipped over? How long had it been? Her body had changed. From this alone, she knew she was no longer a teenager.

The memories continued to slam into her brain with unbearable force. Why were her face and ears wet and sticky?

Her vision began to clear, and she spotted a sink and mirror in the corner of this cold, gray room. Thankfully, the room was very small, as she had to crawl to the sink and use it pull herself to her feet. Her legs

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were so weak and numb, she feared she was now a paraplegic who had fallen to the floor. But after what seemed an eternity, she was able to rise to her feet and look into the mirror.

The memories continued to flood into her mind. Each surge felt like someone was shoving her head mercilessly into a wall. There was a lot of memories it seemed. Lots of catching up to do! She was finally able to make out her image in the mirror.

Before her stood a grown woman. 25? 30 maybe? It was hard to know for sure just yet, because she still needed to sort the memories of the years she had skipped over. It was also hard to tell just how old she was because, like her father, she was old beyond her years.

A steady stream of blood was still oozing from her head, eyes and ears. This was why it was hard to see, and in fact, now the world around her was taking on a reddish hue.

She looked around. The room was indeed very small; very cozy. Three concrete walls, a floor and ceiling, all painted industrial gray. There was no fourth wall. In its place, iron bars.

A jail cell. Single occupancy.

She did what she could to clean herself. The bleeding had at least slowed to a trickle. But she knew there had to be extensive brain damage. The pain from the fast forward was finally fading.

But then, the real pain began.

Alicia now had all of her memories. Memories of the past 12 years.

She was now 28 years old. She might as well have been 100.

As she feared, her father's first nocturnal visit all those years ago had been only the beginning. She endured the insanity of that cursed house for the remainder of her ruined youth. She often sought escape in other destructive pursuits. Her own alcohol and drug abuse. Promiscuity. She got through it all by fast forwarding; leaping past the pain. She even remembered short fast forwards, embedded in this almost eternal fast forward. How could she remember smaller leaps into her future without actually experiencing them first hand?

Alicia fled into the world when she was able, but found little solace and redemption there. She soon became one of the desperate and forgotten homeless we all ignore as we walk down the street. Her new life as an

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adult became a sequence of doing whatever was necessary to survive, managing to get some relief in a shelter, and back again.

Two years prior, she was found on the street by a concerned tourist. (Locals were accustomed to seeing the homeless asleep on the sidewalk and were not alarmed at the sight of her.) Paramedics were about to pronounce her dead, when she suddenly gasped for air. What they couldn't know, of course, is that she had just emerged from another fast forward. Just to get through a cold winter night on the streets.

She was taken to the nearest county hospital, where the attending physician discovered literally dozens of what he termed "pinprick hemorrhages" which had nearly consumed all of her gray matter. "It's a miracle she's not dead." He remarked to a colleague over lunch. "I'm curious what caused it. I've never seen anything like it."

It wasn't enough of a curiosity to save her, however. When she was able to walk again, and her bed was needed, Alicia was unceremoniously dumped back into the cold, cruel world.

Alicia lied down on the bed in her jail cell. Something about this prison block seemed different from what she knew as a "general population" ward. Something she had seen in a movie once.

It would come to her. If she lived long enough. Even as she sorted through the last 12 years of her life in these excruciating minutes, her impending demise suddenly weighed heavy on her mind.

She now remembered that a few months ago, entirely by chance, she spotted her father driving by. It was dusk, and he was probably returning to his "hell house" after work. From the quick glance, she could see he was now an old man, damned both on Earth and later in hell.

She decided right then and there she would help him get to the latter location sooner than later.

The hatred Alicia felt for her father when she was 16 had only intensified. Although she had not seen her father or his horrible bitch for a wife since she left eight years prior, his mere continued existence, the continuance of his tainted, poisoned life, would always continue to haunt her.

Alicia would never know peace. Until one of them was dead.

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And she wanted the satisfaction of taking her daddy's life and sending the bastard straight to hell.

Over the next few weeks, Alicia tracked her father until she knew his routine. Every Friday at noon, he walked down the street on which his office was located. She could surprise him as he passed an alley she sometimes called home. And she was ready. She found a suitable sharp piece of metal that should pierce his paper-thin skin easily. At that point, it didn't matter if she survived herself.

If she joined her father in hell, that was fine so long as she was the one responsible for sending him there.

The big day came and it was nearly time for him to pass by her hiding place. If he came a little early or late, it was no problem. She was on alert, and felt vitality and enthusiasm she had not experienced since she was a little girl.

She felt alive again!

Soon, although she couldn't make him out through the noontime crowd, she heard his unmistakable voice. The one that told Alicia so long ago how much he was reminded of her mother just before raping her for the first time.

He was only a few feet away. Now was the time.

She jumped out of the darkness of the alley and faced the demon who was her father.

And she was with him! The horrible woman he married. The wicked step-mother.

How was this possible?

Her inner voice: "Of course it's possible he's still with her you idiot! They forged a bond of mutual suffering years ago that will end only when one or both of them dies!"

There was a moment of hesitation. After a moment, she lunged her makeshift knife forward. Inexplicably, through an instant of love, heroism of sheer stupidity, the waste of skin who was her stepmother stepped in front of her husband.

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The woman, now old and ruined herself, took the full force of the blade into her midsection. Then her chest. Then a defensive wound to her right hand.

The blood flowed freely from her stepmother's body before nearby witnesses converged on Alicia. Her stepmother was dead before Alicia could be brought to the ground.

Through it all, her father stared blankly, in horror, and with sudden recognition of the crazy homeless woman who had attacked them. His daughter. His victim. His would-be murderer. His redeemer.

And now, here she was in the part of the prison she now recognized.

Death Row.

Sentenced to die for the murder of her stepmother.

She never heard the steps of the guard as he approached.

He saw the blood in the sink, baffled. This prisoner was on suicide watch, and had no way of self-inflicting injury unless she did it with her bare hands.

"What is it?" Alicia croaked.

"We've just had word. Your father is dead. Blew his brains out. Suicide."

Her reaction was not unexpected to the guard. After a moment, Alicia screamed the scream of the damned.

She wished to fast forward to the point in her life when her father was dead.

And here it was.

But it was not by her hand! That was her right! God-given! It had been taken from her by the woman who was her stepmother. Somehow, the bitch knew. And she saw her last opportunity to rob her stepdaughter of what she wanted most!

Daddy was dead.

Alicia would never fulfill her destiny of killing him herself.

And now, finally, there was no reason for her to live.

Alicia closed her eyes and spoke aloud. The guard outside her cell raised an eyebrow, but such crazy behavior was common among convicts awaiting execution.

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“Take me to the moment of my own death.”

It was a painless fast forward.

Alicia was scheduled to die the very next day.