According to Alice

Adam Braver

Alice, according to Alice, is sick of it.

On top of that, she's rattled by the hissing espresso machine, the nonstop clanking of self-bussed plates and utensils piled and tumbling in plastic wash bins, her own coffee only halfway drunk and already cold and flavorless and terrifically unrewarding, and these students and remote workers hogging all the tables, camped out for the day with impunity and self-importance. There is very little that is not bugging her, including Desmond's face, doddering and dripping with kindness but empty of any reading of her. And the one good thing about being in this coffeehouse, thank god, this so-called institution where she and Desmond have been coming every Friday for so many years, where each table has its own memory, its own story, as if they'd carved their initials into chiseled hearts on each and every one, is that they are in a public place (*thank god*, again), otherwise Alice might just burst from all the swollen tension, because the two of them can no longer have a conversation due to Desmond always completing her sentences, which would be a valid reaction if he were getting it wrong, misreading her intentions, or just trying to inject his own inner workings. But no, the frustration, Alice's near sensation of madness, is that he's always right in what he says, as if her thoughts reach his mind before they reach her own mouth.

"Every time I say something to you . . ."

". . . I finish your sentence."



It was the charm of their beginning, a strange form of mysticism, these two people, so young and still forming when they met in college, who came from different parts of the country, different terrains, markedly varied backgrounds, who upon first introduction initially thought to themselves that they had never met anyone like the other. Despite a world of divergent upbringings and experiences, they intuitively understood each other.

Their origin story, their own passed-down mythology.

From that first meeting, and along the intervening decades, they'd always finished each other's sentences. But for Alice, the difference, the change, is measured against

© 2026 by Adam Braver
Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license
https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED.a.1029

those earlier times, when finishing sentences represented a building of ideas between the pair of them, an intellectual and emotional ladder that felt like two distinct but shared visions, constantly inspiring and constructing every thought and idea from global issues to home renovations to work concerns and shopping lists. It truly was "two minds are better than one," a romantic idea that served them well and defined them, bringing both a judgmental laugh and a pang of envy from anyone around them. Now, it seems to Alice, they have become just one mind, predictable to a yawn.

She says, "I have to go to work, I'm . . ."

" . . . already running late."

"Yes," Alice says, trying to reclaim her thought. "I'm already running late. Every Monday morning, the same."

She pushes away from the kitchen table, her cereal bowl in front of her, soggy bran flakes, and the spoon slips down into the milk, disappearing and drowning like a man pulled under, and she doesn't even fish it out, because it seems as though Desmond is waiting, as if when her hands reach down for it, then so will his, and the idea that this could extend beyond language is too much to consider.

Maybe this is a symptom, she thinks, a symptom of something bigger, of society. But then maybe she is thinking like a man, one who excuses his complex symptoms as simple explanations, too worried to go to the doctor and be told it is a disease.

For the final mile and a half to her office, the freeway is nearly stopped, always in the same place, right at the curve where the highway meets the interstate. The black pickup truck behind her inches closer, filling in the rearview mirror. She can feel its rumbling along her lower back, a cool vibration that tremors along her thighs, moves up over her hips, along her spine and grips her neck, sealing off her head.

It is too late to move lanes, impossible to merge onto the next exit ramp even if she wanted.

All you can do is stay straight in your lane.

To the right, a cascade of hills, and to her left is the airport that sits beside the bay, where she can smell the fumes of the jet fuel, hear the roar of the incoming flights, and, just beyond the terminals and parking structures, see the planes stacked up on the runways, while others, one by one, soar into the sky, silver sparks disappearing against the bursts of rising sun.

Maybe, she imagines. One day. Anywhere a random plane will take her. Just pull over and go.

The pickup elbows its way into the next lane over, and then abruptly cuts in front of her, blocking all sightlines of what is happening ahead.

Always her passport in the glovebox. Should she ever act, if only on a whim, Alice would not want to end up in Cedar Rapids.

She heads the creative staff at a paint lab. All trained in the fine arts and lauded for the perspective they bring to a company based on technology, Alice's *team* is credited with creating the language, the vocabulary, that is meant to convey the product, give it its humanity, part cryptanalyst and part translator, decoding the numbers of the L*a*b* (*lightness*, *red/green value*, *blue/yellow value*) into names that capture the essence and emotional quality of the color, reflecting not just hue, saturation, and brightness, but what it says about being alive now. Yet in a strange inversion of roles, the kind that makes her want each new work year to be her last, Alice cannot help but suspect that the chemists and technicians who have developed the paint colors are the true creatives, while she and her team, tasked with naming and describing them, are not creating language or vocabulary; instead they are swindling manipulators who merely take the existing and predictable language of capitalism and wrap it into a shell of perceived humanity.

A busload of middle school students is on a tour of the paint lab, daily it seems, a project meant to expose schoolchildren to different types of industry, to inspire them and encourage them to see the intersection of technology and the trades. They snake through each part of the building, this warehouse at the end of one of the airport access roads, a nondescript and weathered exterior whose interior is built out and configured as a contemporary open floor plan, a Hollywood soundstage, a biophilic design with cubicles, well-being and play areas, and collaborative spaces.

Walking to her office, hands driving into her jean jacket pockets, Alice hugs the opposite wall, dressed the part of the middle-aged urban creative whisking into the studio, her naturally greying hair clipped up and overflowing. Alice, according to Alice, is her own named color wheel: *Blundstone Brown*, *Ivory Tusk Scarf*, *Faded Levi's Night*, *Gothic Lace*.

The middle schoolers barely notice her, busy oohing and awing at the free soda machines, the endless supply of potato chips and candy bars, marveling at the well-being lounge with its bean bags and air hockey and ping pong tables and pinball machines. Bumping into each other as they walk, whispering and pointing, they barely listen to Harold when he stops at a spectrophotometer to explain the process of CIELAB measurements, while, holding up two swatches as evidence, he shows how a formula such as 60.48, 27.46, 50.07 can ultimately equal a tan (*Suede Dunes*) that is 10 percent lighter than 63.36, 22.40, 42.94 (*Moonlight Saddle*). Harold, who even after nearly

twenty-five years in this business, when confronted by a row of large color samples, always collapses into an aura of beauty and mystery, still susceptible to amazement.

Harold's only audience is the teacher at the front, rapt and turned away from the students who continue to note the elements of the play area, pointing out laser-printed figurines in office stalls, movie posters and quotes tacked to their fabricated partitions. They hear Harold as a drone, dismissing his passion as someone who's *too into this*. Harold and the teacher don't see it, believing in their nobility, in the civic duty of opening perspectives and possibilities, convinced this will make a difference for at least someone. Maybe they are right, Alice considers, to think of it as a numbers game; and as she does each time she walks past a tour, she looks for that one girl, shuffling near the front, who plays along with the larger group in their diffidence and defiance and wisecracking and inability to pay attention to anything, that one girl, eyes connected to something deeper, who Alice can see is covertly taking in everything Harold is saying, who clicks with the idea that her world could be different, who on a future day will stay after class when everyone has left and tell the teacher how inspiring it was, that tour, and when the teacher asks what was the highlight, before the girl can speak, the teacher, himself, will look past her toward the classroom door and be the one to answer the question.



In a room within a room in the warehouse, the middle schoolers gone, Alice sits behind her desk, staring at swatches that have been spit out of computer programs. She and her team are under the gun to meet the deadline for the company's roll-out of their new colors, the annual response to the pending *Pantone Color of the Year* announcement. Memos marked "confidential" and "not for distribution" reveal that *Crème Pâtissière* will be this year's Pantone pick, a conservative decision based on input from the design community, practitioners, and industry consultants who suggest consumers are retreating from bright colors or pastels. Harold thinks this is a reaction to politics, a global mood, saying, *We're not quite at nihilistic darks yet, but we are in a cocooning phase, with a need for comfort and embrace*.

After all these years, Alice still manages to get caught up in it, the helpless sense of being drawn in to what doesn't matter, which only leaves her jumping through a firewall of shame, hating herself for allowing herself to get worked up, but succumbing to her internal sense of responsibility and obligation and purpose, always, like a disease or condition, because everyone in the business understands it's not just their take on the color itself that weights its ultimate success, but also its name, that which must perfectly capture and bind this moment in history to a particular hue.

Her phone buzzes. It is funny how Desmond's picture filling up her screen is another form of finishing her sentences, completing her thought, a thought that in this case is the need to think about anything other than the color of the year.

Desmond, who spun off work-at-home into his own consulting business, researching and drafting proposals on behalf of government contractors in the public health arena, purported to be an important thinker but, even by his own admission, mostly is someone with an acute sense for how to take the existing idea presented to him and give it shape and narrative such that his clients forget their own authorship, and instead see him as someone gifted with translating a broad vision into a succinct plan. But even he is wearied by this, prone to wandering through his computer, seeking recipes, bargains on winter coats, hotel room specials, and upcoming movies or music events. And thus are the occasions for phoning Alice during the day, to confirm her calendar before booking a weekend rate, or whether she is up for spicy, or if they could make the earlier showing, or if they'll be on for the coffeehouse on Friday, each time, knowing, of course, what her answer will be, mostly a check on their collective thinking, a commitment to unity at all times on all things.

But she can't bring herself to answer his message, just as she can't bring herself to start brainstorming potential names for the company's four nameless variations of *Crème Pâtissière* on her wall, not because of her inability or some kind of mental or creative block, but for lack of interest.

Alice, according to Alice, is tired of it. Accountability and obligation and purpose. The near insanity of being responsible for giving life to stillborn algorithms spit from all the machines surrounding her, a resurrection, meant to inflate each of them with breaths of familiar humanity so that they can toddle on their own until they are no longer data but instead fully realized colors that stand as the backdrops to the experiences of our life.

Dear god.

She pulls her phone closer, and in the text app, she types, *Busy. Can I call back later?*

He types back, *No problem. Just checking in before a Zoom. Thinking about later. Maybe let me know when you'll be leaving.*

Getting ready to respond, a box pops up with two suggested replies: *Sounds good* and *Leaving soon*.

The roof above her rumbles and rattles as a jet finds its flight path from the airport. Alice considers a simple thumbs-up. Neither response is quite right. It doesn't really *sound good*, and *leaving* is not the same as going somewhere.

Ditching out on work, on everything for the moment, Alice avoids the freeway, already jammed up, and instead drives the service road that hugs the bay and eventually will lead to the back of the airport, the restricted areas that house the maintenance hangars and cargo operators. Once a trail through the warehouse district, the service road is populated by hotels pushed up to the water's edge, built for conferences and complemented by a recent bloom of restaurants that are big and bulky, just like the food they serve, their signature neon drinks in oversized Collins glasses with straws like yard sticks.

Alice pulls into one of the parking lots, a restaurant where the paint lab staff have lunched on occasion, a view of the bay whose majesty cannot be denied, where she is always loath to admit just how much she likes the fried potato skins and the crispy mozzarella. She sits there, parked along the farthest possible row, the one no one ever wants and rarely takes except during Christmas party season, and she cracks the window enough for the salt air to seep through, a whistle that sounds alive and carefree.

From her perch, she can watch the planes approaching the runways, that slow drift over the water, the bellies of the jets just barely hovering above the wakes until in perfect harmony the front wheels catch the macadam, always a held breath until the plane roars and squeals into a stop.

Then there are the planes that take off, nose into the sky, an acceleration of jets and fuel and sonic disruption that seems to crash through sound and break it apart into little pieces. That second in-between, she thinks, just before the sound reassembles.

ଔ

Her phone lies on the passenger seat. She hasn't been able to bring herself to respond to Desmond's text, his simple harmless missive that had no intention other than to connect, and yet it is her potential response that could be the thing loaded with intentions. So she lets it sit, a black screen, only occasionally lighting up with Harold's calls, probably having wandered by her office, door locked early and lights out, and no indication that she'd left the building during this, the critical time of naming their renditions of the color of the year.

Alice leans back, watching all the take-offs and landings, knowing more acutely than ever the meaning of the word *maybe*.

It is the nature of inevitability that is dragging her down, pushing her away, the predictive language, responses, ideas, emotions, anticipation, her loneliness, her mask, her rehearsed lines to keep a speaking role in the play of her life, her outsider clothing, the books she reads, the music she professes to loving, the mannerisms she mimics, the movies she cites as influences (foreign and/or independent), the international restaurants where she eats, her professed charity for the underserved, her sensitivity for how she speaks of marginalized groups, the clever signs she makes for protests and rallies, her opinions on politics, on social issues, on convention and the unconventional, on belief versus organized religion – all of it, all of her, all of Alice, according to Alice, is the real artificial intelligence.

And here's what throws her, as someone whose livelihood is to name the supposed artificial to make it existent: It is the color that is true. That is the real. Light and perception and biology affect and create it, and the so-called technology only facilitates the organic, not mimics it. How has she missed that she's been looking

into mirrors the whole time? Her role, as it turns out, a fool's task, has been to make connection to the color by drawing on the artifice of culture.

Alice reaches over to pick up her phone. She cups it, this fragile device, this crystal ball that holds the world inside it. When it sees her face, the phone springs open, and there on the screen is that last message from Desmond, eager and hopeful, unanswered. Alice squints, the glare is that blinding. Still available in the bottom text box are the predicted responses: *Sounds good* and *Leaving soon*.

Across the water, a jet taxis along the tarmac, wending its way to the queue of planes waiting to take off.

Maybe, this could be the day. And if it were today, she would reach into her glovebox for her passport, and then zombie out of her car, lumbering toward the airport entrance, her door left open, keys dangling in the ignition. Once in the terminal, she would need to find a way to trick the system, clog up the machinery, and find a way to board a plane without knowing where it is going, immune to its stated destination, and upend the presaged, the statistically probable.

But even that, according to Alice, would be part of the plan, predicted by the algorithm, something that is grossly disappointing.

For now, she takes her phone, knowing she owes Desmond a reply, the next line that is already written, ensuring his dialogue will make sense and keep the scene intact. She holds her phone up, turning it to block out the glare, reading it once more to see if anything has changed, and with her index finger, a little more crooked and warbly with nerves, Alice presses *Leaving soon*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Braver is the author of seven novels, including, most recently, *Rejoice the Head of Paul McCartney* (2022), *The Disappeared* (2017), and *Misfit* (2012). He is also the editor of the Broken Silence book series for the University of New Orleans Press, which tells the firsthand accounts of unjustly detained international scholars and writers. He serves as Codirector and Faculty at the New York State Summer Writers Institute and as the Assistant Dean of University Libraries and Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Roger Williams University. His forthcoming novel *The War No One Would Call a War* will be published in 2027.