

Rebecca James
Beautiful Malice

1. The following are the first lines of the novel prologue. Read them and single out as many elements of the plot as you can. Discuss in pairs.
2. In what way do you think Alice ruined the narrator's life? Why? Any guess is acceptable.

I didn't go to Alice's funeral.

I was pregnant at the time, crazy and wild with grief. But it wasn't Alice I grieved for. No, I hated Alice by then and was glad that she was dead. It was Alice who had ruined my life, taken the best thing I'd ever had and smashed it into a million unfixable pieces. I wasn't crying for Alice but because of her.

3. What kind of changes has the narrator undergone?
4. What kind of women remind her of Alice?
5. Now, focus on title of the novel. Read the dictionary entry to the word "malice": *the intention or desire to do evil*. Can you explain the choice of the title?

But now, five years later and a lifetime happier; finally settled into a comfortable and routine life with my daughter Sarah (my sweet, oh-so-serious little Sarah), I sometimes wish that I had made it to Alice's funeral after all.

The thing is, I see Alice sometimes – at the supermarket, at the gates of Sarah's kindergarten, at the club where Sarah and I sometimes go for a cheap meal. I catch glimpses of Alice's glossy, corn-blond hair, her model-like body, her eye-catching clothes, from the corner of my eye and I stop to stare, my heart pounding. It only takes me an instant to remember that she is dead and gone, that it can't possibly be her, but I have to force myself to get closer, to reassure myself that her ghost isn't haunting me. Close-up, the women are sometimes similar, albeit never, never as beautiful as Alice. More frequently, though, they look nothing like her.

6. What mixed feelings are triggered by the memory of Alice? What feeling prevails among them? Substantiate with quotations.

Relieved, I turn away and get on with whatever I was doing before, but all the warmth will have drained from my face and lips, my fingertips will tingle unpleasantly with adrenaline. My day is, invariably, ruined.

I should have gone to the funeral. I wouldn't have had to cry, or feign despair. I could have laughed bitterly and spat into the pit. Who would have cared? If only I'd seen them lower her casket into the ground, watched them throw the dirt into her grave, I would be more certain that she was really dead and buried.

I would know, deep down inside, that Alice was gone for good.

(pp. 3-4)

- 7. You are going to read an excerpt taken from the second chapter of the novel. The narrator has been invited to Alice's 18th birthday party and this marks the beginning of their relationship. What does the narrator feel like compared to Alice?**
- 8. What is the narrator's viewpoint on drinking alcohol? Does she behave consistently? Why?**

Alice is beautiful; strikingly beautiful. She is tall, with generous breasts and long, shapely legs and her face is a picture of perfection: her eyes a deep and glorious blue, her skin golden and luminous.

I'm not exactly ugly, but beside Alice I feel completely unremarkable.

While we're waiting for our taxi Alice takes our empty glasses to the kitchen and refills them with champagne. As I stand up to get my glass, my head spins a little. It's not an unpleasant feeling – in fact I feel easy and loose and relaxed. And this feeling, this light-headed happiness, this sense that the world is a benign and friendly place is suddenly very familiar and I realise just how much this feeling scares me. It's the trick alcohol plays with your mind – convincing you to let your guard down, to trust the world to look after you – but I know that this feeling of safety is only a dangerous illusion. Alcohol encourages you to take risks that you wouldn't usually; alcohol means you make stupid choices. And more than anyone, I know how devastating the consequences of a single bad choice can be. I live with them every day.

I accept the glass but I only pretend to sip on it, barely letting the liquid wet my lips, and when the taxi arrives I tip the rest of it down the sink.

(pp. 14-15)

- 9. Interestingly enough in the Italian edition the title has remained unchanged. How would you render it?**
- 10. Refer to your own experience (direct or indirect). Is there any that somehow reflect the complexity of the relationship described in the passages above?**

Activities devised by Laura Cimetta, Nella Maccarrone, Cristiana Ziraldo.
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