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## ELEGY

by Jodi Gallagher

EXTRACT

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**Notes.**

Time in this play is fluid, moving backwards and forwards - some of the scenes run chronologically. The play is set in no particular period, and thus the indications of time shifting at the beginning of each scene are general - for example - six months later, six months earlier. There is no notion of traditional suspense or reveal - it is known to the audience at the beginning of play that Melanie has died (all they have to do is look at the title of the piece.) The idea is to build a picture of characters and events through resonance and consequences rather than telling the story in a traditional way.

**Melanie** - is 32. A junkie, she leads what would be considered a high-risk lifestyle firm in the belief that she's invulnerable. Bright, funny, self-destructive, she believes there's nothing she can't do - if only there was something she wanted to do.

**Alice** - Melanie's younger sister. The age gap can stretch from 3 to six years. Alice dabbles in drugs like she dabbles in life - like Mel, she has no idea what she wants to do with her time, but her solution is to stay inside her house living through fantasy novels. Mildly agoraphobic, she nurses her neurotic tendencies carefully. She's always felt like she lives in Mel's shadow.

**Susan** - their mother, late forties, early fifties. An unreconstructed hippie - she suffers from all the faults of the boomer generation - a lack of responsibility cunningly disguised as self-reliance, a belief that she'll always be young and beautiful and daring and that ageing is entirely different when it's happening to her. Susan has always wanted to be friends with her children - a contemporary rather than a mother.

**Jack** - Anywhere from early to late thirties. Thinks of himself as an intellectual - in fact, if asked to fill out a form, that's likely to be what he'd write in the 'occupation' box. From a stuffy middle-class background, Camberwell, the proverbial North Balwyn, he likes to feel he lives on the edge - and this is his attraction to Melanie. Melanie's lover while she's alive, he pursues an affair with Alice after Melanie's death.

**Scene One.**

MELANIE IS SITTING IN A CHAIR, OBVIOUSLY ILL. AROUND HER STAND ALICE, SUSAN AND JACK - WATCHING HER. MELANIE IS STRUGGLING TO SPEAK, NONE OF THE OTHERS REACT, THEY MERELY WATCH. MELANIE GESTURES FOR SOMETHING, SUSAN AND JACK MOVE TOWARDS HER - ALICE TAKES A STEP BACK, BEHIND MEL. AS JACK AND SUSAN APPROACH HER, MELANIE WAVES THEM AWAY, REACHING FOR ALICE, WHO MOVES FURTHER BACK. MELANIE BECOMES MORE AGITATED, TURNING, TRYING TO SEE ALICE, WHO REMAINS OUT OF SIGHT. JACK TURNS TO ALICE.

JACK GESTURES FOR ALICE, WHO SHRINKS AWAY. SUSAN TRIES TO COMFORT MELANIE, WHO PUSHES HER AWAY. JACK TURNS FROM ALICE AND SEARCHES AROUND FOR SOMETHING TO COMFORT MELANIE. HE HANDS HER A MIRROR, LIKE A FATHER TRYING TO PLACATE A CHILD. MEL PUTS IT DOWN IMMEDIATELY AND CALLS:

MEL:            Alice...

ALICE MOVES FURTHER AWAY. MELANIE PICKS THE MIRROR UP AND LOOKS INTO IT AS ALICE WALKS AWAY INTO THE PRESENT.

THE SOUND OF A WOMAN KEENING FLOATS ACROSS THE STAGE. ALICE GOES TO A TABLE STANDING IN FOR AN ALTAR. SHE PULLS A FEW OBJECTS OUT OF A BAG AND PLACES THEM ON THE ALTAR, FIDDLING WITH THEM A LITTLE. SHE REARRANGES THE OBJECTS UNTIL IT FEELS RIGHT. THE KEENING FADES.

ALICE:            The statue in the cemetery that glows in the light from the Seven-Eleven all night, just down from the servo. Our lady of the fluorescent lights and the midnight munchies. Is that it? Two children on a summer's day, running away from home. Maybe? Running away from the tourists and the smell of the chips frying in

the kiosk and the chocolate wrappers out to where the sea shines alone and untouched and perfect. Maybe.

SHE TAKES A CANDLE, LIGHTS THE CANDLE, LOOKS AT IT.

ALICE: When the house we built on the pier shifted and crumbled, and the bluestone blocks that made the walls, shoved together, precarious, tumbled too close for us to fit between them any more, we changed our plans. We built our secret house inside ourselves. A silent covenant sealed in blood. When I saw you leaving me behind, when I lost sight of you ahead of me, I told myself I carry the walls, you keep the floor and the roof. We both hold the key. We hid our hearts in the walls of our house, in our bones that made the floor, in the secret whispers, communiqués, silences that opened the door. When we were together, the house was built, and the walls hid us from the world.

SHE BLOWS OUT THE CANDLE.

## *Scene Two.*      **EXTRACT**

TIME SHIFT.

TWO YEARS EARLIER.

A LOUNGEROOM. ALICE IS SITTING ON THE COUCH WITH MELANIE. BOTH ARE SMOKING IN A SILENCE THAT HAS APPARENTLY CONTINUED FOR SOME TIME. A DECK OF TAROT CARDS IS SCATTERED ON THE COFFEE TABLE IN FRONT OF THEM. ALICE REACHES OUT AND FLIPS ONE OF THE CARDS - HOLDS IT UP TO MEL FOR INSPECTION. THEY BOTH NOD. BEAT. ALICE DROPS THE CARD.

MEL:            Which was it that did it?

ALICE:        They said the port.

MEL:            How could they tell it was the port?

ALICE: If he hadn't had the port first. He'd be alive.

MEL: It seems unlikely.

ALICE: That's what they said.

MEL: I mean, it's not as if you hear every day of someone dying from port. Think of all the flash restaurants who'd have to think twice.

ALICE: Public liability.

MEL: Precisely.

ALICE: They didn't say that it was the port that actually killed him. They just found the empty bottle.

MEL: So they don't even know if he drank the port last night. It could have been there for weeks.

ALICE: They said he drank it last night.

MEL: But they don't actually know.

PAUSE.

MEL: Will there be an autopsy?

ALICE: Do they always do an autopsy?

MEL: I have no idea.

ALICE: It's not as if they're in any doubt about it. He didn't leave a note or anything.

MEL: But if there's an argument about the smack and the port...

ALICE: It's hardly an argument. The port helped.

MEL: But in what proportion? Which one tipped the balance?

ALICE: True.

MEL: Quincy MD.

ALICE: Precisely.

ALICE FLIPS ANOTHER TAROT CARD.

ALICE: That's the fourth this year. And it's only August.

MEL: Not the fourth OD.

ALICE: No. Just the fourth. Johnno, Tim, Sweet John and Nadia.

MEL: She OD'd.

ALICE: Yes.

EXTRACT

MEL: But you didn't know her. She was my friend. And Sweet John was AIDS. Tim hung himself. He left a note. He got what he wanted.

ALICE: He might have changed his mind.

MEL: But we don't know that he did.

ALICE: We don't know that he didn't.

MEL: Tim doesn't count.

ALICE: Who's counting?

MEL: You were. Just not accurately.

PAUSE.

MEL: Johnno's the first real one for you.

ALICE: He's certainly really dead. Of that we're certain.

MEL: The first real one.

ALICE: Of course, you've already done this. You can tell which ones are real and which aren't. Some of them, of course, aren't really. Not really. They're just fucking pretending. If you watch long enough you can see them swallow. Or breathe. Johnno, on the other hand...

MEL: Don't.

ALICE: Don't? You were the one laying down the law. Again.

PAUSE.

MEL: You get used to the war.

ALICE: Right. Absolutely. Of course. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

MEL: I know how it sounds. But they think we don't have one...

ALICE: 'Them' again? Who are 'they'? The bloody gnomes of Zurich?...

MEL: And they're always telling us that's why we don't have any real commitment, no real politics, no real passion. Too young for Vietnam.

No blood on the wattle for us. This is ours.

ALICE: What about the Gulf?

MEL: Doesn't count.

ALICE: Some might argue...

MEL: It's not us. And no matter how long they flog Vietnam, it wasn't us, either. We just watch the movies. It might as well be the Crusades.

ALICE: Robin Hood riding through the glen...

MEL: Precisely.

ALICE: I remember the moratoriums.

MEL: So do I. 'I heard it on the radio, and I saw it on the television.' I own it like I own *Star Wars*. Darth Vader and Jim Cairns. Now there's a pair. Our friends still have to fight, though. (BEAT) And die.

ALICE: Is that what we're doing?

MEL: Not us. We watch and run away.

ALICE: Live to fight another day.

PAUSE.

MEL: Who found him?

ALICE: Rick.

MEL: Is he all right?

ALICE: He did four hours in the cop shop while they asked him questions.

MEL: Out the back?

ALICE: Yes.

MEL: Shit.

PAUSE.

MEL: But he's all right.

ALICE: He thought Johnno was still alive when he went into the room. He tried to give him mouth to mouth but he was already dead.

MEL: Yuk.

ALICE: He's upset about it.

MEL: Have the cops been here?

ALICE: This morning.

MEL: They don't let the grass grow. Happy to hassle you for nothing, and step over the dead bodies in the street. Or charge the corpse with littering.

PAUSE.

MEL: Did they take your name?

ALICE: They knew my name.

MEL: How do you know that?

ALICE: Because they called me by it and I hadn't told them.

MEL: I suppose they could find out.

ALICE: They didn't know my last name. Only my first name.

MEL: What makes you think that?

ALICE: Because they asked for my last name, but when I opened the door they called me by my first name. So they must have known my first name, but not my last name.

MEL: I have to use your phone. Is it OK if I use your phone?

ALICE: I really don't care.

MEL: I know. But is it OK?

ALICE: Why wouldn't it be? I've paid the bill. It goes.

PAUSE.

ALICE: It's paranoid crap, Mel. You've seen too many movies. Use the phone.

MEL: It could be how they knew your first name. It'd explain why they didn't know your last name.

ALICE: It could be. Except that half the people who ring me these days are chasing money, and they all use my last name. Or it could be my fucking sister banging on the door at four in the morning screaming Alice are you awake and one of the neighbours complaining. Everyone within a fifty mile radius must know my fucking name. Use the phone.

MEL: What was that number Karen gave us so that we could ring up and find out if the phone was tapped?

ALICE: I can't remember.

MEL: Didn't you write it down?

ALICE: If you ring up to find out if the phone's tapped and it is tapped then whoever's tapping it will know you know. And they wouldn't bother anyway. I don't know anything about Johnno's bloody dealer.

MEL: But they don't know that.

PAUSE.

MEL: If I can't use the phone then I have to go.  
PAUSE.

MEL: You'll be right. Life goes on.

PAUSE.

MEL: You know I can't hang around, I have to go.

PAUSE.

MEL: Fuck.

ALICE: Can't you put it off? You keep saying you can stop, and I'm not even asking you to stop. Can't you just delay for a while until Ricky gets here?

MEL: Obviously I could if I wanted to. That's the point, if I wanted to. I don't want to. Life goes on. You'll be fine.

PAUSE.

EXTRACT

MEL: Precisely. Fine.

ALICE: Yeah, I suppose I will.

MEL WALKS OVER TO HER, STANDS FOR A MOMENT, UNCERTAIN. LEANS OVER AND KISSES HER ON THE CHEEK, QUICKLY. ALICE SHRINKS AWAY AS SHE DOES THIS. THEY BOTH PULL BACK WITH A FEELING OF RELIEF THAT AT LEAST THAT PART IS OVER AND DONE WITH.

MEL: Welcome to the war.

SHE EXITS. ALICE GATHERS THE CARDS AND SHUFFLES THEM. BLACKOUT.

***Scene Three.***

TIME SHIFT.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER.

ALICE LEANS ON A RAILING SMOKING. SHE IS WHISPERING TO HERSELF AS JACK ENTERS.

ALICE V/O: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done.  
And we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us."

ALICE WRITES THE LAST LINE ON THE WALL WITH THE VOICE OVER AND STOPS WHEN SHE SEES JACK.

ALICE: Any change?

JACK: What were you saying?

ALICE: Nothing.

EXTRACT

JACK: No change.

ALICE: I can't think of a reason to stay.

JACK: Stay for me.

ALICE: I'm not making a difference.

JACK: For me.

ALICE: There is no health in us.

PAUSE.

JACK: Come back in.

ALICE: In a minute.