

Love Was the Plan, the Plan was . . . A True Story About James Tiptree, Jr.

Mark Siegel

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All dialogue is quoted from letters and taped conversations.

"My first memory of death is from when I was ten and traveling with my parents on one of their expeditions, One night I saw a man on the banks of the Ganges burning his dead mother. Not a great big fire—he couldn't afford the wood, I guess—but with little sticks. The body wasn't burning very well. He tried and tried, but finally he gave up and threw the bones in the Ganges. The river was a dark, muddy, great thing. But then he walked down the steps of the Sank into the river and seized her skull before it floated away, and prised out the gold teeth. This was an act of filial piety; this was mother's request, to hand this valuable down to her offspring, and the fact that he had to pry them out of her skull was of course looked on quite differently there."

James Tiptree, Jr.

I'd been in the law library for so long I'd forgotten, but it must have been May 20 or 21. My secretary beeped me about a phone message from a Mr. James Turner, something about a mutual friend named Tiptree, and I called him back from a pay phone in the lobby.

Jim had wanted to offer me condolences on the death of my friend, Alice Sheldon, whom most people knew as James Tiptree,

Jr. A story of her suicide and the shooting death of her husband had been in the *Times*, but I hadn't seen the papers in a couple of days, so it was only thanks to Jim that I knew then. I was stunned, but not surprised. While trying to talk to him on the phone, my mind was 2300 miles away, sitting in her workroom/library five years before, next to the drafting board set-up she used as a desk, sipping some of her husband Ting's *Gwerztrameiner*. He still liked good wine, but was no longer up to finishing a bottle before it spoiled, and Alli rarely drank. "I'll never let myself outlive him," she said quietly, nodding toward the living room where Ting was watching TV. "His eyesight's going. He has to sit right on top of that set now to see anything." She told me, as she'd told other friends, that if things got too bad for him, she'd kill them both. "Unless of course I die first," she laughed, taking another hit off her cigarette and hacking loudly. The scar on her chest from her recent open-heart surgery purpled with anger.

If you knew Alli Sheldon, you knew she was absolutely serious about this. We were pretty close for a while, and I never heard her say a single thing, from the most trivial to the most monumental, that I didn't believe she meant. She was tough and honest and wise, and I'm angry as hell that she's dead, because I miss her so damn much.

"Do wise, moral, tough people kill their husbands and themselves?" my wife asked me when T tried to talk about it. She's a nurse, a bright and compassionate lady who knows a lot about death. She probably thought she was asking a rhetorical question. But I have to tell you: at least one did. It's a little hard

to explain, unless I tell you this story about the woman you knew as James Tiptree, Jr.

And the strangest part is, it's a love story.

"To make contact, you have to have love. . . . To communicate, you have to have empathy." She said this about her story "With Delicate Mad Hands." She said this about her life.

"The writing and me are pretty much of a piece. I am more self-conscious, I think, than most people. I've had to be to survive on the basis of finding out what the hell was happening. And it may be that I really do live with a degree of pessimism that would make one scream."

Alice Sheldon was born in 1915, the only child of a Chicago attorney and a socialite. Her mother, Mary Hastings Bradley, was an accomplished writer, and both parents were explorers who generally took their young daughter with them on their expeditions to Asia and Africa. *"I was already marginal by school time. I was unpopular, except with dull adults. Ugly face, and a very late puberty." Alli became a painter, and her works were displayed at a number of prestigious galleries before she was twenty-five. ("I worked hard at it, and I got just good enough so that I could see why I wasn't any good. That was fun: to understand why Rembrandt was Rembrandt, Picasso was Picasso, and Duchamp was Duchamp—and I was just me, I saw them with eyes that were delighted. . . .")*

" . . . Then I got married in order to get away, because mother was making a debutante out of me. The next thing was that I was

going to be presented at Court with thirty white feathers, Seven days after this wonderful coming out party, THE event of 1934, I married the first guy that asked me. He'd been put on my left by the social secretary, and I thought he was OK. . . .

"He was beautiful, he was charming, he was a poet, he had references from the deans at Princeton—but they forgot to mention that he was an alcoholic and supporting half the whores in Trenton. He was like an angel possessed by demons. It was an extraordinary thing

*"Mother quite rightly perceived that this was no father for her grandchildren, but unknowingly removed the possibility of grandchildren forever by having the head of gynecology at the University of San Francisco Hospital perform a legal abortion on me—just a D&C, but he muffed it, and he wouldn't admit he muffed it and discharged me from the hospital with a temperature of 104. We got in the car and started out through the Mojave Desert, which was only a one-track road at the time, you know, with signs saying 'Last Water.' Bill had brought cases of whiskey and one canteen of water, and halfway through the desert to Santa Fe, with me getting hotter and sicker, the day about 120, the car broke down. He said, "This is the end!", emptied the water, drank a quart of the whiskey. and passed out in the back seat. Well, I drove that car the rest of the way to Santa Fe, a sign that said "Doctor," and passed out on his steps. The next thing I knew, this doctor—a sweet old man, but into his drugs like Daniel Dann (in *Up the Walls of the World*)—he was sitting on the side of the bed holding a tube in which was a fetus about the size of a lima bean, and he was wriggling it in front of my eyes, saying, 'See, see. . . .*

"Experiences of that sort show you two things. One was that I could get there if I didn't give up. And two, well, I have to laugh at it because I'm damned if I know what something like that does teach you. It just seems funny. But I knew the world wasn't ever going to pat me on the head and say 'Poor girl'."

Funny "ha ha" or funny peculiar? Or what?

"I honestly don't know what irony is. Either that or I live it day by day, moment by moment, eat it for breakfast like granola, so I don't recognize it."

I said: *"To me irony seems like the normal outgrowth of ambiguity, of seeing both sides of every action. I don't understand how people can avoid being ironic, even about things that they respect religiously. One of the reasons I'm asking you about it is that irony becomes something I see everywhere, even when people don't intend it, so I have to go back and check . . ."*

"Sounds like breakfast," she said.

When World War II broke out, Alli left Mexico, where she had gone to paint, and came back to Chicago to take a job as an art critic "until they opened the WAC." It was very important to her to go in with women officers, and despite prohibitions against women serving in almost any capacity except motor pool driver, cook, administrator or quartermaster, she became the first woman in photo-intelligence in the armed forces. The P.I. work took her to Europe, where she met Huntington Sheldon of American Intelligence, a blue-blooded Wall Street drop-out who was A-2 for all of Europe. *"We got married almost immediately, then waited to meet each other later in life."*

They came back from the war financially and emotionally exhausted, and effectively dropped out of their former lives, going to Rutgers agricultural school and running an egg hatchery. *"At the end of about four seasons we had recuperated fully from the war and the army. Washington was calling, yammering for Ting to come down and set up American Intelligence. . . . They called for me under my maiden name as a photo interpreter at the same time. I was one of our senior photo intelligence people by then. And so, waiting for Art Lundell, Sid Stallings and I set up the original P.I. shop down at the CIA. Of course now it's 1200 people over the torpedo factory using techniques I've never even heard of. When we flew over an area, it was five miles up, taking evasive action. Christ: trying to figure out if something was 'Tombs, Ancestral,' or 'Emplacements, Antiaircraft'! they have this infrared stuff where they can tell by the temperature of a tree if a tank's been parked under it. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, from 90,000 feet they literally were taking pictures of outhouses and could see one guy sitting and two standing. It's unbelievable. "It's 'clean intelligence,' you see. You aren't blackmailing anyone, you're not holding anybody's children hostage, you're not strong-arming them or intimidating them, or threatening or rewarding them. You're simply looking over the fence, as neighbors would in a small town. . . .*

"Anyway, I didn't like [what was happening in the CIA]. I was trying to do basic science in intelligence and just didn't fit. One evening I left the safe open—the only time I'd ever done that in my life. I caught it after twenty minutes and went back, but I knew that my subconscious was speaking and that if I didn't listen to it I would do something much worse. So I quit . . .

"They tried to keep me in . . .

"I was all choked up with Ting because I was having to submerge myself to help him. He was in a very high pressure job as Chief of Current Intelligence . . . And so I ran away. I used my clandestine training to disappear. In a day I had a new name, a new bank account, had rented a house and really destroyed all traces of my former personality, including sanitizing my books and everything else. I was really a different person in the bottom of this little house where I lived for about six months. And Ting never found me, though he really hunted for me. And then finally he did, and actually came and courted me for the first time.

"Every time I've been threatened with a [permanent position] I've run. In this case I didn't, and I knew I loved Ting. I hadn't gotten to the point, the terrible point you get to when you know you'll never be happy for another moment if this other person is unhappy, when you're ONE person—which happens somewhere along the line, and when it happens, you've had it. Your heart is hostage from then on. But I came back, and then we set up this home, a log at a time

"Yeah, I've loved, the sort where your heart aches when you happen to see the other asleep. And you just stand and stare down, mesmerized and aching. . . ."

We spoke about her work a lot, because that was the excuse for our first meeting. So I said, "The planet-life-form in 'Source of Innocent Merriment' is doomed and sees all, but accepts all. It knows it is transient and doomed, but it can accept that and still feel joy. Is that a description of love?"

She said: "Yeah. I was also groping for a way of life, too. I don't think I'll ever accept all with pleasure, but I think perhaps I'll accept and laugh.

"I'm glad you read that story. Nobody else seems to've. . . . [Perhaps it's because] the SENSE of the story is really confined to the kind of people who can imagine that kind of love."

At the age of 41, Alli decided to get her bachelor's degree. Eleven years later she completed her doctorate in experimental psychology at George Washington University. The day she finished, strung out from the effort and unable to sleep, she decided to write a science fiction story for relaxation. . . . The rest, as they say, is history.

"My usual method of writing is to take one of those pockets in my head that is full of protest against unbearable wrong and dangle plot-strings in the saturated solution until they start coming up with plot-crystals on them.

"I wonder if all this nuts-and-boltery doesn't detract from whatever value my work had for you. There's a tendency to want a good writer to compose in a white-hot mist of dream-head unattainable by ordinary mortals, Maybe there is something about my thinking unusual for the ordinary mortal, but I tend to suspect it has something to do with hard work and the luck to have the time for hard thinking But I really have no desire to be unattainable by ordinary mortals, my true desire is to grab people by the heart or the collar-button and hiss Listen! Listen and think, you dolt! Feel how it really is! Let me inscribe a little fable on your nose that will carry more than the words with it when you

look in the mirror! . . . Something like that. Cautionary Tales, incarnated in entertainment. Pretty trivial and ordinary, I hear you say. . . . Well, if I have to be more than mortal at some point, let me say that I qualify as some kind of expert on evil. maybe pain, too. . . ."

"I haven't talked much about who or what Tiptree loves, has loved, will love. And how. (One doesn't. Talk I mean.)"

"And what I hate. Not 'considerations of moral value'—much simpler. Natural love, natural hate—the ratiocination comes later. I am no 'balanced onlooker, Mark. I'm a loaded gun, an achingly loaded gun wholly unable to get a shot at those who are my enemies. As balanced as your average functional paranoid. And a lover, whose love is dead. The Earth, as it was, yes . . . and others, people and things. . . ."

The words come off my fingers now, here, three-quarters of a year after she's stopped talking to me, but do you get it? Am I communicating to you anything of the intensity with which Alli Sheldon lived? I knew her first through her writing, and it was the same thing that stood out then as later, after I'd coerced my way into her house, into her life. The stories are wired with the passion with which she lived her life, are marked from the white-knuckled grasp she held on reality. Her stories showed that, for the individual, the most significant thing is passionate experience, the intensity of certain moments, good and bad, when she is most truly alive. In one of my personal favorites, "On the Last Afternoon," she echoes Robinson Jeffers's advice, "Be in nothing so moderate as love of man This is the trap that catches the noblest spirits." The character doesn't take the

advice, and dies. One of the things I loved best about Alli was that she could never take that advice either.

"I've spent my life picking myself up off the ground and going, 'Ouch! That was an interesting experience' I'd put myself out naked into something which I was bound to get screwed up in just to learn.

It's intensity which makes you look, makes you see."

She was capable of deep depression (which she usually kept to herself) as well as ebullient, overflowing life. She wrote never-ending after-thoughts in the margins and on the envelopes of her letters. Her postcards were often covered front and back, words coiling around my name and address. It wasn't disorganization—far from it. But it was an organic organization, with tendrils of thought connecting everywhere—and color-coded, with different shades of paper and ink and a variety of bright plastic paperclips. (*"When you write to me," she said after our first meeting, "address the envelope in red."*)

Once, just before its publication, we were talking about *Brightness Falls from the Air*, and she said, *"We die of too much life."* One of her alternate titles for the book, though she never really considered it seriously, was *The Planet of Too Much Love*. Most of the deaths and tragedies in the novel occur at least partly because of love.

Do the things I'm telling you about her sound like contradictions? If I'm making her sound like someone whose moods dictated her logic, I'm screwing this up because of my own moods tonight. Alli was one of the most philosophically consistent people I've ever known, one of the most thoroughly reasonable writers I've ever

read. The fact she and I both believed that feelings come first, before we find the ideas to justify them is relevant, but it doesn't discredit logic or morality.

The body of her work is preoccupied—and not always optimistically—with the ongoing struggle for survival of both individuals and the race as a whole. She was a scientist and an atheist who had built a conscious and coherent world view out of what she'd learned from her observations on the planet. Of our race, she knew that mankind was a pocket of negative-entropy struggling to survive in a universe that as a whole tended toward entropy. Of individuals, she observed that creation and procreation were inextricably bound up with death and destruction.

"Neg-entropy" was the great good of the universe as she saw it, and it was the foundation of her philosophy toward life. To paraphrase it crudely, we love what we are, and wish to become it more perfectly. What we are most obviously is alive and, more specifically, human, so we strive to increase complex, anti-entropic organization with human qualities (particularly those quality which are creative—neg-entropic—rather than destructive), *"When I attained this vision of Life loving Life, and aliveness as all the properties that defy entropy, I had all the argument I thought I needed as a rational base for a comprehensive ethics-aesthetics."*

I've written about this stuff at length elsewhere—you can find some of it in my *Starmont Reader's Guide to Tiptree* if you want—but let me just assure you here that Alli had developed this philosophy into a very comprehensive metaphysics. The thing about it was that it wasn't designed to engender false hope in the

afflicted, keep the poor in their place, or promote a particular social scheme (although this last it certainly did). Alli's philosophy embraced life as she saw it, including its pain and destructiveness, and helped to guide her actions. It was not a philosophy of passive acceptance of that pain and destruction, but advocated a continuing struggle against it. In story after story Tiptree's characters struggle and die, but they do it with a sense of purpose that is awesome; they do it trying to minimize pain and destruction to others, jamming their very lives into the dike to hold back entropy as long as possible.

But only so much is possible. Alli's health was poor for some time before her death at the age of 71. She suffered heart attacks, bleeding ulcers, and severe depressions, often apparently caused by a bio-chemical imbalance. Ting, who was her senior by more than a decade, suffered strokes and blindness in his last years. It is not difficult for me to understand how, having lived her life as she had, she could feel that ending that kind of pain of her own accord was the moral thing to do.

I'm not suggesting her suicide wasn't brought on by depression or that it was purely an act of cool judgment. *"I've had great difficulty with unstoppable, intractable pain, enough to know that your personality doesn't last through it, begins to fragment,"* She told me a story about a physician friend who, responding to an emergency phone call, found her writhing on the floor of her living room. Because of the nature of the stomach ulcer involved, and Alli's own apparent inability to simply pass out, the doctor could do nothing to alleviate her tremendous pain—and was so overcome with her agony that he suffered a heart attack, falling

to the floor beside her. *"I've outlived several of my doctors," she laughed.*

That laughter was her response to pain about which one can do nothing. (Two of her most memorable contributions to Jeff Smith's fanzines were an autobiographical piece called "How to Have an Absolutely Hilarious Heart-Attack" and a discussion of her writing called "If You Can't Laugh at It, What Good Is It?") She chided me for being overly serious in dealing with her biography, and often mentioned that her work was "slapstick." Yet I doubt many people have ever read a Tiptree story for the yucks. (Go ahead, name two.) The laughter in Tiptree is a response to life that recognizes her place in it, her relationship to it. (She rarely laughed at others.) It's the same cosmic laugh I've heard in Chaucer and Shakespeare, It's the laugh of Troilus as his immortal self looks down from heaven at his body dying on the battlefield. (Troilus—now there's a Tiptree-type character for you, the lover of faithless flesh, the best defense his doomed race has to offer.) But I'm not talking about literature in particular here. That grand concept of "comedy" is a way of looking at life, a perspective that allows you to solve the problems of the day and imagine that society is whole again after some inevitable loss. That sort of comedy requires a suspension of disbelief in the mortality that Tiptree rarely, if ever, made. To her, mortality itself was the great joke of human existence. Her laugh was not a denial of death but an affirmation of life in the face of it, a rifle shot at an enemy she could never hit. It's a laugh that only can come from a person who understands life as she did, has no illusions about it, who knows from experience how badly she can

hurt and knows that she'll be hurt again—and can love life in all its awesomeness.

Alli "postponed" much of her own life in the last two years because of Ting's increasingly poor health. She read to him and fed him. Because he was such a part of her, as his flesh died her spirit did too. Toward the end he was virtually comatose. Ting had been an avid fisherman, and she transported them both to Alaska to a well-known fishing spot, hoping that he would know the salt spray on his face, that they would have a few more moments. . . .

One day we were talking about aging and pain and I asked her if she hoped someday to find tranquility. *"Yeah," she said, "but I'd just as soon somebody else took the valium. I guess my goal is to get through the breakers surrounding the tranquility of old age. I've thought about death a great deal. Death, my old pal; When I was twelve I tried to cut my wrists by imbedding a razor blade in a five pound history book. I cut both sides of my wrists because I didn't know where the veins were. But when you realize that death is not a choice anymore, then you get through the line of breakers. You go through this 'I too am mortal, I too am a dog eaten by worms.' Have you noticed that people who say that are usually grinning, while people who tell you they have faith look pretty worried?"*

Isaac Asimov wrote a spirited editorial in his magazine using Alli's death as platform for advocating euthanasia. "Mrs. Sheldon was condemned to death by society because her husband was condemned to life," he said. Alli would have sympathized with the cause but railed at that sentence, The lady was nobody's victim.

She was going to die because Ting was, and she was absolutely, totally in love with Ting. Dave Hartwell wrote in *Locus* that "Alli was notable for her jocular and ironic determination to survive in spite of her admitted desire to die." Do you see that we're not talking about someone torn by contradictions?

"I never knew what was meant by the phrase 'Live from day to day' until I came to the point where 'tomorrow' was perhaps countable in days. The answer is, if there's something you can enjoy doing, do it. Even if you're building a pyramid and you'll never live to finish it, go ahead and bring the stone. Somebody may finish it, somebody may not. It's the doing of it. I build things around here that will outlast me and will never be used by anybody. I enjoy doing it. If you have somebody who is in danger of feeling bad, and perhaps if you smiled and seemed busy it would make them feel better, go ahead and do it. It's important."

She was fixing a toaster and I had been looking at the colored carp in her atrium. They'd had a large tree growing there in the house, but it got too big, and I imagine the leaves were hard to vacuum, so they'd replaced it with a Coi pond. The whole house was like that; something that she and Ting had built with their hands, that they continued to build as long as they were able. I asked if it was the activity itself or the sense of being useful that was important—"or is it leaving something behind, the sense of immortality?"

"I believe it in part to be no more than a distraction, but a distraction that contains in it a way of life. Take those Coi out there, I know they will outlive me. They live sixty or seventy years. It's just that at the moment, at the point of looking at them, their brilliance or prettiness or knowing something about

them—the Japanese names for the different colored patterns or the whole ritual they've evolved around them—those things interest you. ~Y little depression came when nothing interested me. And the effect of finding the answer to the abnormal part of the depression was that interest came back.

"It's like combating the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse with a handful of popcorn. But that handful of popcorn keeps you going. There is no sense in going on, there is no sense in any of those things, but thank God one does not live by reason alone.

"And then, as the Persian said, the horse may fly . . ."

The story about the condemned Persian who was granted year's reprieve by the King in order to fulfill his promise to find a flying horse can be told in a funny way, not here, and not by me. There's a different kind of laughter coming on.

She had this unforgettable laugh that sounded like stone cracking. I miss Alli at many small moments. I want to tell her about my kids and a book I've read, I want to bounce some thoughts off the wall with her.

But I believe what she believed, that life is pretty damn wonderful and that it's full of pain, and that death is not a choice. That you can see someone's face in your mind and feel all those things at once, and not be confused.

The only time she ever complained about something I wrote was the bio I did of her for *The Reader's Guide*, It was, well, sanctimonious. maybe it embarrassed her, but she said that the perspective was basically wrong, didn't suit the subject.

"Whatever we do let us not forget to laugh. At the damned biography, at me—you don't need me to remind you that the

Great White Object-of-Contemplation is also a fairly ridiculous spectacle, half natural comedian and half silly fool—"and I would be disappointed beyond measure if you didn't carry away from all this the memory of a few good laughs."

She wrote a great piece about aging for Jeff Smith's *Phantasmicom* called "Going Gently Down." It was funny—I mean funny "ha ha"—and on the nose, and it cut like a razor. After reading it I called her up and said, "You know what we have to write before we die, Alli? Forget about fiction and scholarship. We each need one good joke, a punchline to go out on."

She laughed and said she'd work on it. She promised "not to check out" without telling it to me.

When I read over her letters these days, I have the feeling she kept her promise. I'm just not sure which line it is.