**ALICE WYLD’S SHORT, SWEET INNOCENT LIFE**

--When there is no risk there can be no pride

in achievement and consequently no happiness.

 Ray Kroc

It turns out that Mrs. Alice Wyld holds the Athens, Georgia, record for being fired from more Waffle Houses than anyone else. Six in all. And that takes some doing from someone who comes across as such a sweet, committed, sugary and friendly waitress. But was it all her fault?

My wife Emily and I first encountered Alice one Saturday morning at the South Milledge Street Waffle House. She was so sweet and attentive—and attractive. She stopped by our booth at least four times to inquire how we were doing and to chat.

It turns out that BOTH Alice and my wife were born in Warrior Valley in northern Alabama, though many years apart. They both knew the same small towns of Altoona, Allgood, Fridays Crossing, Little warrior, and Susan Moore. They both played in abandoned coal mines west of Red Mountain, which is west of Altoona. They had some things in common, but there were other things they did not have in common.

Have you ever noticed how some people, no matter how much you like them at first, can wear threadbare with time, whereas others wear on and on like comfortable old shoes? Alice’s sugary demeanor gradually began to wash away, to go into solution, you might say. It became clear that her practiced waitress persona—her earn-a-big-tip behavior—was a put on. It must be hard to fake it eight hours a shift without sometimes letting down.

We once chanced upon Alice in the CVS Pharmacy parking lot. At first, she did not see us, puffing deeply on a cigarette and marching headlong and determinedly toward the door, flinging the still-lit, half-smoked, paper-wrapped tobacco stick on the sidewalk. (I remember reading somewhere that 85 percent of alcoholics smoke, though Alice probably never took a drink; my unofficial survey over the years is that 85 percent of sober Waffle House waitresses also smoke.)

As soon as she spied us, Alice’s taunt and ruddy-faced anger abruptly vanished and her waitress bearing came sweeping over her. She was so happy to see us, etcetera.

One morning I went to South Milledge Waffle House alone. I was invited to sit down by Robert Olds, a former used—I mean, previously owned—car salesman. I kiddingly always called him Mr. Oldsmobile, despite the fact that he sold Toyotas. Of course, Alice was our beaming waitress, relishing the chance to serve two heavy tippers.

After taking and calling our orders to Manuel, the short and usually rotund cook, she came back to our booth and let down her guard. She appeared serious, displaying a new and quite different image to me now. Alice told us a somber story, tears welling up in her eyes at one climatic sentence, when she revealed that “MY daddy sold me when I was 13.” Her gripping account left Mr. Oldsmobile and me fully believing her tragic and stomach-turning tale. We pawed over our scrambled eggs and grits as best we could. We left her an especially large tip, more than I had ever left her in her saccharine-charm mood.

Maybe her story revealed why she had an angry underbelly, which she tried so hard to hide with her candy-coating affectation.

She never brought that appalling topic up again, nor did I, as she seemed rather reserved and perhaps ashamed the next time I saw her, all business for a change.

Robert Olds later told me that he brought it up with her, her father’s gross criminal selling of a 13-year old girl to sexual slavery. Surprisingly but perhaps understandably, Mr. Olds said that Alice denied ever telling the slavery story, saying it must have been another waitress who told him. This lie was not her first or last that she told the customers, including me.

It turns out, based on casual conversation with another waitress at the then-new Epps Bridge Road Waffle House, that Alice had been terminated at the now-closed West Broad Street Waffle House. The waitress had worked with her but did not know why she was fired. Alice had also been fired, according to Mr. Olds, from the South Milledge Waffle House, where she had obviously been later reinstated. The reason was chronic tardiness, the same reason for her firing from the Five Points waffle House. That’s three dismissals. Three to go.

Then somehow she returned to the South Milledge restaurant where she had spilled her grievous, sad, and most troublesome over-breakfast story.

It turns out that the reason she was rehired at the South Milledge store was that the regional manager, Patrick, was her brother-in-law, revealed by another waitress, Tweedy, in response to my rude question.

One morning, sitting alone at a booth, Alice came over to wait on me, bringing my unsweet ice tea in a to-go cup. She sat down next to me to write down my order, as usual, cloyingly close to me. She called me “sweetheart,” as was her custom, but then precipitously jumped to her feet and hastily asked me, “How is your wife?” It was then that she introduced me to Eddie, her common-law husband and their six-year old daughter. She must have momentarily forgotten he was there, so habitually bent was she in her sweetly soliciting her tip. Eddie was giving Alice a stern, malicious stare as I stood up to shake hands. Eddie was a tall, red-neck-looking man.

It turns out that a waitress had told me previously that Eddie sometimes beat up Alice so bad that she couldn’t work the next day. Alice herself had told me previously that Eddie was an auto mechanic, but that he was on disability because an engine had fallen on him at the nearby Shell station and messed up his back and leg. When he got up from the booth, his walk was firm and steady. He certainly appeared to be strong and healthy. He was a house husband.

About two months later, Alice and Lisa walked up to serve me. Lisa was a trainee. About one week later, Lisa served me on her own. When I asked where Alice was, she said Alice had been fired. I asked why. Lisa said that Patrick (regional manager and Alice’s brother-in-law) had promised to pay Alice $10 for training her. Now Lisa was bragging, “But I learned so fast that Patrick only paid her $5. When Alice angrily complained in a loud voice, Patrick responded in an even loader voice, “You’re fired.” Alice filed a sexual harassment suit against her brother-in-law.

Alice then became a waitress at the new Highway 29 waffle House, where Manuel was now cooking--the short, fat cook. Shortly thereafter, unbelievably, it was Manuel who Patrick fired for having an affair with both twin waitresses, Karen and Sharon. Alice was not fired for another few months.

It turns out that, a few months after Manuel’s firing, Alice was showing evidence of pregnancy. She was so elated, as she loved her young daughter, and now she would have a son. Everyone was happy for her, except Eddie, she said.

It turns out that the baby was born December 11, 2006, exactly two weeks before Christmas, and exactly one month before she was fired from the new 441 Waffle House. Joy turned to shock, then despair, and then terror. The baby boy was certainly not Eddie’s, the older man who had so greedily purchased Alice as a 13-year-old, 12 years ago. The baby’s father was obviously Manuel, who had left Athens, perhaps for Mexico.

The very day Alice and baby Edward Wyld, Jr., went home to their double-wide trailer just north of Lexington, Georgia, located a quarter mile down a dirt road off Highway 77, 16 miles south of Elberton, Alice disappeared. Alice’s mother had just arrived from Atlanta to help out when Eddie insisted that Alice accompany him to buy groceries at the Athens Super Wal-Mart.

She went missing. Eddie reported to the police that she had become tired while shopping and said she would meet him in the truck. “She must have been abducted,” he told the police.

It turns out that on December 23, two days before Christmas, the suspicious Wilkes County sheriff, while poking around the Wyld’s trailer yard, found an odd patch of fresh dirt. Below was Alice.

The Alabama grandmother took the Wyld daughter and baby, now renamed Emerson, back with her. Eddie took up residence for a life sentence in the State of Georgia Penitentiary in Wrightsville without the possibility of parole.

Merry Christmas to sweet, innocent Alice, so hurt and victimized by life that she lashed out. May no one ever have to endure such a horrid and despicable existence.