

TLC Showcase

ALICE BURNETT

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Introduction to 'Ideal Love'

Ideal Love is the story of a young couple, musician Venus and lawyer Gilles, who are broken apart. It's about what happens when an almost perfect love is called into question, how lost love might be found again and generally about getting more love into your life.

After an argument with Gilles late one night, Venus is left devastated the next day by his sudden death. But when she discovers that he died of a treatable genetic condition she knew nothing about, she is haunted by the thought that he didn't love her enough to save himself. As time passes, Venus looks set to be trapped between grief and distrust forever. Until she meets the shy, good-looking and seemingly ideal Alex.

Intertwining Venus's compelling attraction to Alex in the present with Gilles' enraptured pursuit of her in the past, *Ideal Love* is an intimate and life-affirming novel about love, from its incandescent beginnings to its final breath and back again.

Writing a novel takes drive, even if unlike me you can do it quickly, and I had several different engines running at once writing *Ideal Love*. First, the taming of fear and glorifying in fantasy that must prompt lots of novels – particularly in this case, the fear that someone I loved would die and the fantasy that I could connect with another person completely, or the fear that I'd die and the fantasy that I could check death out and pop back to life no problem. Second, I wanted to write a book about love that appealed to the whole of someone, mind, heart and body, and communicated the experience from beginning to end – its elation, grief, comedy – the way love gave life meaning, the way it could take meaning away. Third, I wanted to be hospitable, to make the book as satisfying as possible, a kind of Rivendell you wouldn't want to leave.

I'm not sure I succeeded in those aims, but trying to meet them took time and effort, and I missed having colleagues to laugh things off with, and to show me where I was going wrong. Professional writers don't help much with that, they only let you see the finished product, they delete the mess that got them started. The reports I had from TLC were my teachers and companions. What you crave with a novel is an objective, thoughtful, sensitive overview. I received that from TLC twice over.

Extract from *Ideal Love* by Alice Burnett

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'Fever Breaks' by Michelle Shocked

Venus held Leonie on her lap. Having offered condolences, the doctor looked over his glasses and apologised, one of his receptionists was away, there was no Mrs Matheson on the system.

It's Venus Rees, she said. She hadn't changed her name when she got married.

Ah, he'd found her.

They'd begin with the cause of her husband's death. As she knew, he had had a severe heart attack, which for a man of his age and apparent health was unusual. The practice had no medical records for him – presumably he had not felt unwell.

'However,' his voice tightened, 'the body does not always provide warning signs. A heart attack tends to arise when a blood clot obstructs the flow of blood to the heart. The clot typically forms on the surface of ruptured cholesterol plaque, rupture itself being caused by various factors – high adrenaline, high blood pressure, oddly even certain types of cholesterol...'

Venus listened, the importance of the words vying with her unwillingness to process them. The argument she could have done something about. Exaggerated insults staked on sure odds of reconciliation, waking up to the sound of the front door closing, not even calling from the bedroom window –

'... a tendency to high levels of cholesterol and low density lipoprotein in particular, hence the increased likelihood that plaques will form and eventually rupture. Diet is a factor, but the primary problem is the inherited inability of the body to clear cholesterol efficiently.'

The doctor took some papers from the side of his desk. 'The postmortem indicates a high-risk lipid profile, along with external manifestations of hypercholesterolaemia. The white ring of cholesterol around the iris for example is rarely seen in the under fifties.' He set the papers down in front of him. 'I assume there's a family history of premature death?'

Venus hesitated. 'Sorry, this is all new to me.'

'Yes, it can seem complex. Is there anything you'd like me to explain again?'

'No, no.' Venus held Leonie. 'His father died young. In his thirties I think.' She tried to remember whether she knew his father's exact age. 'He was six, so his father must have been young. I'm sure it was a heart attack. His uncle died fairly young as well.'

He nodded. 'Now I'm afraid there are likely to be implications for anyone related to your husband.' He glanced at Leonie. 'Did your husband have any other children?'

The thudding had started in her head. 'No.'

The doctor turned to his computer screen. 'And this is Leonie?'

'Yes.' She hadn't allowed the thought, the direct phrasing of it.

He read for a moment, then looked at her. 'Well unfortunately we must consider the possibility that your daughter may have inherited the condition. There won't be any need for medical intervention at this stage – '

'But...' Venus interrupted him, then stopped.

His eyes darted for a moment. 'There's a one in two chance, unless by a quirk of fate – ' He paused. 'That would be most unlikely, but I assume you'll want to have a cholesterol test yourself. Now, if your daughter does have the condition, there are several effective cholesterol-lowering drugs available for when the time comes. Managed properly, it needn't be a serious worry.'

Her face felt almost see-through, an imperfectly wiped windscreen.

'... My husband's death could have been prevented?'

He looked at her, then nodded. 'Yes, had he been diagnosed, it's very likely that his blood lipids would have been reduced to more acceptable levels.'

She looked steadily at him. 'He would have lived. I mean, had he known.'

'Had he been treated, yes, he might well have lived an average lifespan. Now as far as your daughter is concerned, there's little point in carrying out a cholesterol test until age eight at the earliest. How old is she now?'

'Two,' she said. 'Sorry, you mean we can't find out now?'

'There's no need for your daughter to be treated at this stage.'

'But couldn't she have the test anyway?'

The doctor gave a short sigh. 'If she has inherited the gene, her cholesterol levels are unlikely to be dangerous until adolescence at the earliest.'

'But couldn't she have a genetic test?'

'As I said, there would be no need for treatment.'

'Yes, I understand that,' Venus spoke slowly, 'but I'd like to know one way or the other.'

The doctor cleared his throat. 'Should a reliable DNA test come into existence, you must ask yourself whether the rigmarole could leave you with any positive benefit. Besides which, the cholesterol test is perfectly adequate.'

'But the result might be negative.'

'And it might be falsely negative.'

'But this kind of science is progressing daily, surely... ' She was speaking from ignorance. 'What I mean is I'd like to know now. One way or the other, I've got to know.'

'Mrs Matheson, we must also take into account whether your daughter has got to know. The most important thing you can do at this stage is to ensure she eats healthily.' The doctor took some brightly-coloured leaflets from the side of his desk and passed them to her. 'These should give you all the information you need. Now, we mustn't forget your husband's other blood relatives.'

The doctor's phone rang.

Within a minute, Venus was carrying Leonie out of the surgery.

Over the previous few days, Leonie had asked Venus questions in bursts. Where was Daddy, when was he going to stop being dead, why was he dead, what was dead. Venus had told her it was like when the phone broke that time Daddy threw it on the floor. But she'd regretted saying it. There was too much cause in it.

It was lunchtime when they got home from the doctor's. Venus cooked some pasta, cut some butter to stir into it and then stopped herself. She looked at the label on the jar of tomato sauce and mixed some in. She wrote *low fat cheese* on a piece of paper. What a slop of a meal.

Half way through eating, Leonie said, 'Want Leo dead now.'

'No.' Venus wondered whether Leonie had understood everything the doctor had said.

'Want go with Daddy.'

'Listen Leo. If you were dead I'd never see you again, and I don't want that to happen.'

Once Leonie had started watching television, she took Gilles' address book up to the phone in their bedroom.

Jane answered with her surname. She said how nice it was to hear from Venus and how was Venus coping and wasn't the funeral wonderful, if one can say that about such occasions, one thinks one can, and was Venus ringing about the bereavement group.

Venus took a breath. 'Jane, there's something I've got to ask you.'

'Of course dear. What is it?'

'At the reception, you said this tragedy had cut across the generations, that the same sorrow had struck yet again.'

'Oh goodness yes, that was insensitive, I do apologise.'

'But you knew Gilles had a genetic condition?'

'... Well of course I was never absolutely sure. But H       asked me not to bring it up – you know, she said she and Gilles had agreed to live as if nothing had happened, Gilles wanted to get on with the life he had – well I assumed he'd tested positive and there wasn't anything anyone could do. Drugs can only achieve so much. And H       is awfully sensitive about these things, understandably of course. That's why

I so admired you my dear. Your wedding day was such an inspiration to me. Two young people so in love and so joyful, despite all this dreadful business. *Carpe diem*, I thought.'

Venus's eyes closed. 'Jane – I knew nothing about this.'

There was silence.

'... But you must have discussed it with Gilles? Surely, I mean he wouldn't have kept it to himself?'

'No.' Venus wiped her face. 'No, he never said a thing.'

'Oh my dear.' Jane's voice faltered.

'So I need to know exactly what happened. When you found out about Frank, what Gilles said when you told him, *everything*.'

'Of course, of course. Gosh... I'm so sorry.'

'Please, just tell me what happened.'

'Yes. Well I have to tell you I – I never spoke about it to Gilles directly.'

'What?'

'No, it was all through H  l  ne, I mean I wrote to Gilles of course, but – '

'You mean you never once *talked* about it with Gilles?'

'No. No, I didn't, but – '

'Why the *hell* not?'

'Please Venus, let me explain. It was just after Frank died. Gilles would have been... well, let's see.' She paused. 'Twenty-one. Yes, that's right. I saw the doctor and he told me that Frank had had the high cholesterol condition, and that it was inherited and that everyone should be tested – our two, thank God both in the clear, and Gilles, and Aunt Elisabeth, and so on. So I wrote to Gilles and H  l  ne, separate letters, at home in London. It wasn't the sort of thing one could just announce over the phone, and Frank and I had only been back in England for a matter of months.'

We really didn't have much contact with H      .

'But the letters could have got lost, stolen, anything – '

'No, please wait dear. Of course I would have telephoned after a week or so, but in the end that wasn't necessary because H       telephoned me. She said that Gilles had seen the doctor straight away. And she begged me not to mention it again. She said she and Gilles had agreed to live as normally as possible. And I promised her I would say no more about it.

'I understood completely. No one wants to face death at any age, let alone twenty-one. The repetition of the whole business must have been more than either of them could bear. She said how lucky I was to have a daughter, possibly she thought girls were safe which of course they're not. But the fact was that neither of my children were affected, so it was particularly hard on her and all the more difficult for me to mention.'

Venus was quiet.

'I didn't see H       or Gilles for years. Frank and I had been in Africa for so long, and then of course H       moved to Paris. I suppose the next time must have been at your wedding, and that was far too nice an occasion to spoil. And then nothing until, well, until last Thursday.'

Venus had screwed her eyes shut. 'He wasn't taking any medicine. I never saw him take a pill – he didn't do it. He never went to the doctor.'

She stopped, and it hit her fully that he could have known and not told her, barely even told himself, literally pretended everything was fine.

'You don't know, do you, for certain...' Her voice trailed away. She started again. 'You don't know that he actually knew, do you?'

'No dear, I don't.' Jane paused. 'But I know that H       knew, and that the instinct a mother has to protect her child is one of the strongest on earth.'

Venus dialled the Paris number. The answering machine kicked in. Venus started to speak and H       picked up the phone. Her voice sounded over buoyant.

'I was going to phone *chérie*. How are you? I hope you are taking care. Maybe you would like to come to Paris soon?'

'No, thank you Hélène, I have to be here at the moment. I was ringing to ask you something.'

'Please.'

'I've just spoken to Jane. She said she wrote to you and Gilles after Frank died to say that Gilles should have a cholesterol test. You told her he'd been to see the doctor and you didn't want to discuss it again.'

There was no sound on the other end of the line.

'Hélène?'

'*Vénus*, this was a long time ago.'

'Yes I know.'

'You must understand it is difficult for me.'

'It's difficult for everyone.'

'It is as she says. She wrote to me and I became very anxious, of course. And then Gilles went to the doctor – to have the test. It was just a blood test, not complicated. And when the result came, well, we decided not to speak about it. I told him, it was for him to decide what to do, he knew what I wanted, but I would never speak of it again. I could not... But Gilles must have told you this. You know all of this? Is there anything else?'

Venus's jaw set. 'No, there's nothing else. I – I just wanted to check. Well, I'd better go. Leonie is hungry.'

'*Bon*. My kisses to Leonie and to you, naturally. We will speak soon.'

She put the phone down, gripped with silent convulsions.

Seizing one possibility after another, she ran through its implications, its plausibility. He couldn't have known, he couldn't have lived like that. Hélène was mad, lying, protecting herself.

But however hard she tried to banish it, the thought came back. Perhaps he really hadn't told her. Let it happen, kept it quiet. Some insane form of sacrifice.

Lived a lie but at least he hid the pain. '*Don't* make me doubt you.' She grabbed the photo of them from the table by the bed. '*Don't do that.*' She flung it on the bed. '*DON'T DO THAT.*' She shoved the clutter from the table to the floor. Light, books, radio, photographs, crashing. Receipts floating down like leaves. And dust that hung and didn't fall.

But it was too quiet, too lacking in consequence. She felt the sinew in her fists, the blood in her brain. You could snap yourself apart.

She had told him everything, from the unforgettable to the half-forgotten. But there was always something he kept back. Gaps, bits of delusion. The truth, all she wanted. More than bloody love.

Was it her blindness, was that what had seen them through?

But it hadn't, had it?

He was dead.

Her mind shrank from the thought. He is dead. Crunched in on itself. He is dead. She'd just spoken to his mother. Just pushed his things to the floor. Leo downstairs. Dead dead dead.

The house was dim when Venus heard the brush of the door against the carpet. She saw the look on Leonie's face.

Overcome, she stood up too quickly and felt faint. She couldn't understand how it had got dark.

Leonie was walking with her head bent down.

Venus took her in her arms and hugged her.

When they separated, Leonie looked at her as if she were a sick animal. 'You cry Mummy?'

She breathed out. 'Only because I'm so pleased to see you.'

'Catty in garden.'

'Yes...' And she wept that the means of comfort she used on her child was being offered back.

She took a breath, blew her nose. It was late, they needed to eat.

'Aren't you hungry?'

'No. Had bikit.'

'Oh clever you,' she blinked as she smiled.

She picked Leonie up. 'Come on my love,' she carried her out of the room, 'let's have supper.' She turned the hall light on and they went downstairs.

Later that evening when Leonie was in bed, she went back to their room. She pulled out the radio trapped between the bed and the wall by its long aerial, picked up the books from the floor, the crucifix with the zigzag body hanging from the rosary, the photograph of them smiling which he'd taken with his arm outstretched.

She checked the other photographs – Hélène, Gilles' father, her mother. They were all intact. She put them on the table beside the shrine that she'd spared, the picture of her father standing alone. As Leonie would no doubt in time spare a picture of Gilles.

Everything back in its place.

She sat against the bed, stretching her fingers then closing them tightly.

To love until death do us part? That was not what she'd meant. She'd meant that she'd love him eternally, beyond life and time. Forever.

Was it supposed to be impossible? Were people too defeated to try?

Oh poor Mrs Matheson. Did you hear? Her husband died. What? But he was so young. Heart attack, apparently.

Had he been treated, yes.

Some genetic thing. God, poor woman. And the daughter – so young.

Managed properly, it needn't be a serious worry.

Death, the patient waiter, his spiral of coils, his cosy snake nest. Waiting for the mother to drop her guard. Unable to believe his luck when the mother showed him the way.

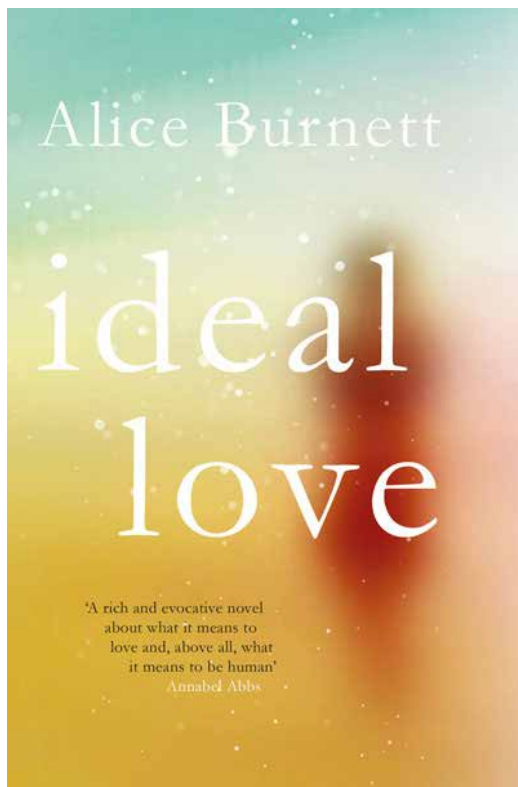
She washed her face. The house had gone cold. She went downstairs for a glass of water.

She came back up, opened the window, breathed the air and closed it. Each moment, each act was too defined.

She crept across the corridor to Leonie's room. She watched her chest rise minutely with her infrequent breath, her brushed hair around her resting face. She put the duvet back over her legs. The spare bed was right beside hers, ready for Gilles when Leonie woke up in the night. Still dressed, she went to it.

About the Writer

Alice Burnett grew up on a farm in Devon, England. She studied Mathematics at Cambridge followed by a degree in Philosophy, a subject she is still passionate about. She qualified as a lawyer in the City and worked in London and Paris before leaving law to write full-time. She lives in London with her husband and three sons. *Ideal Love* is her first novel.



***Ideal Love* is available to buy here:**

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Ideal-Love-Alice-Burnett/dp/1787199894/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=