

**Click**  
**by Patsy Ann Taylor**

Alice sits holding her husband's hand, knuckles digging into knuckles. Brief introductions. Explanation of how the group works. Coffee splashing into carafe scents the room. Fluorescent light. Conference table pushed against one wall makes room for the circle of stackable chairs. The room fills with an assortment of bereaved. All have lost children.

The leader, Shirley, opens the meeting. Begins her story: Only child, daughter, killed in auto crash . .

Alice listens for as long as she can then flips the switch in her brain. *Click.*

*Dean is about four. He pokes his fingers in the unsliced wedding cake. They are guests at the reception of Alice's coworker and Dean has wandered off on his own. The bride and groom are not upset. They laugh and the groom lifts Dean up and offers him a spun sugar dove right off the cake before bringing him back to Alice's side.*

Shirley nods to the person on her left. Small, curled into herself, brunette. Alice can see the woman wants a cigarette – the way she fidgets and twists the edges of her sweater.

The woman says, "It's the hospital's fault. Or the HMO." Her volume control is up. "The lawyers are investigating." Her voice continues to rise but no one interrupts. "We're suing them all. The bastards."

Shirley reaches out to stroke the woman's arm.

"Well, the surgery is experimental. We knew that going in. But, according to a doctor friend of Jimmy's, successful in some cases."

Alice glances at the name tags slapped on each member of the group. No Jimmy.

"HMO wouldn't approve it, bastards. The doctors' hands were tied." She snuffles into a tissue, waves her turn away.

Alice has already tuned her out. *Click.*

*Dean struts toward his dirt bike. Helmet under his arm, a wave without turning to see if she waves back before he pushes the two-wheeled -mother's-greatest-fear onto the waiting tow trailer. He and his buddies laugh the freedom of the almost free as they drive away.*

The next two people decline to speak, a man dressed in suit and tie, straight from the office, Alice guesses. And a puffy-eyed woman in jeans.

"I come to give Shirley support." The woman two chairs away from Alice almost whispers. "My son drowned nine years ago. I'm living a pretty good life now. You can get on, you know."

Alice does not believe this. Truth comes from her lips but the body language says otherwise. Nine years, and she is still in hell. Alice does not look at her again.

“My boy died of alcohol poisoning. He was sixteen.” A pale, dark-eyed girl who doesn't look more than sixteen herself. “He and his friends used to go to this empty house down the block and drink. And one night Joey and the others just kept doing shots and when Joey closed his eyes, they just left him there.” She takes a breath. “His best friend came over after the funeral and told me what happened. Joey would never have left any of them alone like that . . .”

Alice squeezes her husband's hand until he pulls his fingers out of her grip and puts his arm around her shoulders. She thinks about the night they learned Dean had died. *Click.*

*“He looked so peaceful. I never saw him so happy.” The girl who shared the drugs that killed him seems to have walked away unharmed. Alice wants to stab her in the throat. To cut out that sickening over-sweet sympathetic voice.*

*“I loved him too,” the girl says when Alice forbids her to show up at the funeral.*

*Her husband puts his arm around her knotted shoulders. To calm her? Hold her back? She doesn't know why. Maybe to keep from killing the girl himself?*

“Alice?” Shirley speaks to her as if she is a thick-brained child. “Alice, we ask newcomers to tell their story. If you'd like to say something?”

Alice shakes her head, stares at her husband. His eyes are closed, as though that will shut out the rest of the group. Shut out the reality.

“Alice? Are you sure? Anything you'd like to say?”

The room is silent. The flicker buzz of the lights overhead. The sizzle of coffee hitting the burner. The brunette sniffing into her handkerchief. The woman whose son drowned taps her fingernails like a heart beat.

“Alice?” Shirley leans in, her mouth bleeding lipstick and cream cheese. And silence. The tapping, buzzing, sizzling, eyes-squeezed-tight silence.

“He was my baby,” Alice says at last. “After it all, still my little boy.”

