

**“Magic Terminal Trip”:  
The Creative Life of Dr. Alice Sheldon**

**A Treatment**

David Lavery

**Opening Credits:**

The opening credits begin with two epigraphs, which remain on screen long enough for even a slow reader to take them in.

By the time you get to sixty (I think) the brain is a place of incredible resonances. It's packed full of life, histories, processes, patterns, half-glimpsed analogies between a myriad levels. . . . One reason old people reply slowly is because every word and cue wakes a thousand references.

What if you could free that, open it? Let go of ego and status, let everything go and smell the wind, feel with your dimming senses for what's out there, growing. Let your resonances merge and play and come back changed . . . telling you new things. Maybe you could find a way to grow, to change once more inside . . . even if the outside of you is saying, "What, what?" and your teeth smell.

But to do it you have to get ready, years ahead. Get ready to let go and migrate in and up into your strongest keep, your last window out. Pack for your **magic terminal trip**, pack your brain, ready it. Fear no truth. Load up like a river steam-boat for the big last race when you go downriver burning it all up, not caring, throwing in the furniture, the cabin, the decks right down to the water line, caring only for that fire carrying you where you've never been before.

Maybe . . . somehow . . . one could.

James Tiptree, Jr.

What is a woman? . . . One of my first answers was that women are really truly aliens.

James Tiptree, Jr.

From a close-up on the words in bold in the first epigraph, “magic terminal trip,” a dissolve takes us to the film’s title:

**Magic Terminal Trip**

**Sequence 1. The End**

We open on a moving camera approaching the exterior of a house in McLean, Virginia. It is night. As the camera tracks across densely wooded property toward the brightly lit house in the near distance, we hear a sharp sound—it would appear to be a gunshot—ring out. The camera enters through a downstairs window, surveys briefly the ground floor (all the lights are on in the house, and we briefly enter 1) a tool room off the living room and 2) two adjoining screened porches, both lined with book shelves). We pass a grandfather clock on which we can see the time (3:30) and begin to climb the stairs to the second floor. A slow pan discloses a variety of pictures hung on the wall:

- a photograph of two adults on safari with a very young child (perhaps four or five) in tow
- a photograph of Mexico City
- a photograph of a woman in her late thirties in a World War II WAV uniform

- several framed aerial reconnaissance photos
- a painting depicting a black man lining up a pool shot. A close-up reveals the signature of the artist in the lower right-hand corner: Alice Bradley

At the top of the stairs, the camera turns into what appears to be a study, lined with books. A large desk sits under an open window. The camera pans the book shelves. Above the desk the camera discovers and lingers on a variety of wall hangings: several membership certificates—for the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Psychological Association, Science Fiction Writers of America, National Organization for Women, Esperanto Society of Washington—and two framed diplomas, one indicating the conferral of a B. A. degree by American University in 1959, the other a Ph.D. in Psychology by George Washington University in 1967. The camera moves in for a closeup on the name of the recipient of the second diploma: Dr. Alice Sheldon. We see a desk calendar revealing the date: May 19, 1987. Then our attention is directed to a group of books standing alone on the desk between two bookends; in closeup we can make out the titles on the bindings:

- *Out of the Everywhere and Other Extraordinary Visions*
- *Star Songs of an Old Primate*
- *Ten Thousand Light Years from Home*
- *Up the Walls of the World*
- *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*

All, we note, are by “James Tiptree, Jr.” A second sharp sound, similar to the first but much louder, breaks the night’s silence. On the wall over the desk we see several plaques mounted on the walls:

- One reads “The Nebula Award for the Best Short Story, 1973, Presented by the Science Fiction Writers of America to James Tiptree, Jr. for ‘Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death.’”
- Another: “The Hugo Award for Best Novella Presented to James Tiptree, Jr. for ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In.’”
- A third: “The Nebula Award for Best Novelette, 1977 to Racona Sheldon for ‘The Screwfly Solution.’”

As the camera pulls away from the desk, we take note of a prominently displayed envelope on the front of which appear the words “Last Wishes.”

The camera leaves the study and moves down the hallway, entering at floor level a beautifully furnished bedroom. When it reaches the room’s large four poster bed, it tracks upward, showing us still moist blood on the bed-clothing and discovering lying there the body of an elderly man, perhaps 80. Although his slumped head is turned away from the camera, we can make out the sight of a massive wound on the right side. The camera pans down to the man’s right arm and on to the hand, which we discover to be enmeshed in the hand of another. After lingering for a moment in closeup on the two hands tightly together, the camera moves from the second hand up a second arm, slowly revealing the dead body of a silver-haired woman in her seventies. Although not clearly visible, it appears that she, too, has a head wound. Panning across her body, the camera moves down her right arm, which dangles over the side of the bed, showing her open hand and, below it, on the carpet beneath the bed, a gun.

Though the camera stays focused on the gun, an instantaneous dissolve hints at the passage of time. We see a gloved hand pick up the weapon and place it in an evidence bag. As the camera pulls back to reveal the bedroom with which we are already familiar, we see

(for the first time) the two bodies together on the bed. The room is full of people, some in uniform. A photographer snaps pictures.

The camera withdraws and exits the house, revealing the hurly burly that normally surrounds a crime scene. Outside it is early morning. The camera seeks out and takes heed of a woman in a housecoat (a neighbor?) who is speaking with a reporter bearing a *Washington Post* ID. We hear her say, through her tears,

“They lived a beautiful life, very loving. They were very vital, intelligent people. They were finding life very fragile right now.”

The image of the woman’s crying face dissolves slowly into that of a newspaper story:

**Bullets End 2 “Fragile” Lives  
Author Kills Husband, Herself in McLean**

**by Patricia Davis  
Washington Post Staff Writer**

A renowned science fiction writer shot and killed her ailing husband and then herself in the couple’s McLean house early yesterday, apparently carrying out a pact to die if living became too difficult, Fairfax County law enforcement officials said.

The bodies of Alice Sheldon, who wrote under the name James Tiptree, Jr., and her husband Huntington Sheldon, a former CIA analyst, were discovered in their bedroom with bullet wounds in their heads after police received a call from the couple’s attorney at 3:34 a.m., police said. Alice Sheldon was 71 years old; her husband was 84.

“She left notes indicating she was going to do it,” said Commonwealth’s Attorney Robert F. Horan, Jr. “Evidently there was some sort of pact between them. . . . It appears that her husband’s health was increasingly becoming more difficult for him.”

As the image of the obituary slowly fades out, and the next image fades in, an unidentifiable male voice explains:

“Alli was a spy from the day she was born. Always in a foreign city, remembering the details, suicide a real option if they tried to take your truth. Good at hiding, not a frightened fugitive, but the agent who can pretend he’s one of you. She liked best the people who found her out.”

**Sequence 3. Childhood.**

- Somewhere in Africa a man and a woman, both dressed in classic explorer clothing (pith helmets, jackets, pantaloons), speak in animated fashion, with the help of an interpreter, with the members of a “primitive” tribe.” At the couple’s side stands a “pudgy, red-haired and freckled” young girl, perhaps five or six years old.
- We see the same girl, now 10 years old, in a 1920s girl’s bedroom curled up on her bed reading *Amazing Stories* magazine, completely engrossed. By her side lies a pile of books and magazines. Prominently visible on the top of the pile is a magazine called *Weird Tales* and a volume on whose binding we can make out the words “H. P. Lovecraft.”

**Sequence 4. The Last Flight of Doctor Ain.**

A fashionable office in a Hollywood film studio. A screenwriter known for his skill with

adaptations pitches movie ideas to a studio exec interested in making his reputation by acquiring some potentially hot new science fiction properties. "What do you have for me?" the exec asks.

"'The Last Flight of Doctor Ain.' A world-renown scientist seeks to commit speciescide by introducing into the biosphere a genetically redesigned, incredibly lethal leukemia virus, one that is unstoppable because it utilizes the human body's immune system as part of its own life cycle, and although we are never explicitly told what his motives are, we do learn that Doctor Ain has enacted his fiendish plan on the behalf of a woman, a 'wounded, dying woman,' with whom he is obsessed, even on his own deathbed. After arrest for his act, Ain talks to himself of his love and actions on her behalf, and we finally begin to grasp the nature of his sacrifice. He's done it for a woman, a woman named 'Gaea'; he has saved the earth from the species that threatens her existence. What do you think?"

"No. What else do you have?"

### **Sequence 5. Painter.**

Alli Bradley (in her 20s) at an easel, painting. She is clearly frustrated and stops several times to correct what she has done.

Over the image we hear Alli Sheldon's voice say:

*"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. . . ."*

### **Sequence 6. First Marriage.**

Over four shots, each lasting between twenty and thirty seconds:

1. A dinner party with both men and women dressed formally. A very young Alli Bradley talks in animated fashion with a handsome young man beside her (his name, we learn from a seat assignment card on the table, is William Davy).
2. A 1930 automobile drives through the desert at night; William Davy is at the wheel, Alli Bradley sits beside him on the front seat, obviously in tremendous pain.
3. The same car broken down. William Davy lies beside it in the desert night, a nearly empty whisky bottle still in his hand. Alli Bradley still in great pain, drags him into the back seat of the car and then drives off.
4. A doctor's office. A kindly looking, though clearly jaded, elderly man in a medical coat, sits beside Alli Bradley, who lies on a medical bed. Through her not-able-to-focus vision we see, in subjective camera, a test tube, its contents not discernible.

We hear, in voice-over, Alli speak the following:

*". . . 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. . . .'"*

#### **Sequence 7. Jumping the Fence.**

A young woman, apparently asleep, lying in bed under a sheet, her back to the camera. A pan to the foot of the bed reveals the young Alli Bradley, who has just finished dressing. She gives the woman in bed a light kiss on the forehead prior to leaving the room, closing the door softly behind her.

#### **Sequence 8. Houston, Houston, Do You Read.**

Studio exec's office yet again: "What else do you have for me?"

*"'Houston, Houston, Do you Read.' Three male astronauts pass through a 'temporal singularity' which thrusts them forward in time and return to Earth several centuries ahead of their own time. The culture of Earth has radically changed: a completely feminine society has arisen in the wake of a world-wide epidemic, a society devoted to women's values (it is non-violent, egalitarian, non-technological, focused on the nurturing of self-worth). An all-female rescue crew meets the male ship in orbit and, after deliberating its fate, refuses to admit the men, and their atavistic, now understood-to-be-pathological mindsets, to Earth. What do you think?"*

*"No."*

#### **Sequence 9. The Army.**

A young Alli Sheldon walks into an Army Recruitment Office (the camera offers a close-up of her high-heel shoes). She speaks with a lieutenant. In voice-over we hear:

*"I came back to Chicago—I'd been living in San Angel, near Mexico City, mucking around on the fringe of the Diego Rivera/Orozco/Siqueres crowd, and took a job as the Chicago Sun's first art editor, while waiting for the Army to open female enlistments.*

*I trotted down to US Army Recruitment Station Number 27 in three-inch heels and my little chartreuse crepe-de-chine designer thing by Claire somebody, and my pale fox fur jacket. . . ."*

Dissolve to a shot of Alli Bradley ascending a speaker's platform in a small auditorium. In

voice-over we hear Alli say:

*In Officer's Training School I had to give a two minute lecture on—shall I ever forget it?*

*Alli: "Paragraph Ten of the Infantry Drill Regulations."*

From Alli's point of view behind a large podium, we look out at the audience of men and women in uniform. Suddenly, Alli vomits violently all over the podium and collapses face forward onto the platform.

### **Sequence 10. World War II.**

A nearly decimated small village, the scene of a recent ferocious battle. Alli Bradley in World War II uniform, a tremendous look of pride on her face, helps to lead the town's liberation (we see food and supplies unloaded from a large truck, eagerly received by the townspeople, mostly women and children). Into the midst of the happy scene, a jeep drives up, containing two soldiers and a woman in her fifties sporting a journalist ID. As Alli looks on, her face of triumph changes into a near-sowl. As the woman in the jeep alights, camera in hand, she calls out "Alli!" And Alli replies "How nice to see you Mother."

Over these images in voice over.

*"I couldn't count the times I was patted on the head by some eminence and told, "Little girl, if you're half as talented, half as charming, as good, as warmhearted, as plucky, as capable, as beautiful, as witty (name ten) as your mother, you'll be lucky. . . . It was always 'half,' too. . . . My parents always [insisted] that I'd outdo them in some undefined way. I had to: I was their only chick. The love they squandered on me was in real fact meant for ten, but what we know now was an rh-factor problem killed the other nine—for which I, of course, felt guilty. Nine dead babies and me. . . ."*

### **Sequence 11. A Momentary Taste of Being**

Studio exec's office again: "What else do you have for me?"

"'A Momentary Taste of Being': It's the far distant future. The Earth is hopelessly overcrowded and polluted, on its last legs. A giant spaceship is launched into the cosmos to search for another inhabitable planet. After a decade a perfect target world is finally found, but too late the explorers discover that they (and eventually the earth colonists who they have already beckoned to come) are only the "sperm" necessary for an alien form that must be impregnated by other consciousness. What do you think?"

"Heavens no."

### **Sequence 12. In Hiding.**

In an office at the Central Intelligence Agency (as we learn from an establishing shot), Huntington Sheldon answers (with a sense of urgency) a phone call.

Dissolve to a small house, somewhere in the midwest. Inside the cabin we see Alli Sheldon sitting in a chair by the window, reading. She arises to go to a steaming tea-kettle and pour hot water into a mug. Through a window behind her we see two black 1950s automobiles pull up. Alli turns to watch them, smiling, as she swirls her tea bag in the mug. We hear a knock on the door, and Alli goes to answer it. As the door opens, we see Ting standing outside. No words are spoken during the scene but in a corresponding voice-over accompanying the scene, and a subsequent shot in which we see a house under

construction with both Alli and Ting involved in the process (hammering nails, sanding wood).

Over these images we hear Alli speak (in voice-over) the following:

*"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 than finally he did, and actually came and courted me for the first time.*

*"Everytime 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 . . . ."*

### **Sequence 13. The Screwfly Solution.**

The office of the studio exec again: "What else do you have for me?"

"'The Screwfly Solution.' A worldwide epidemic of sexual violence against women is rapidly destroying the reproductive capability of *Homo Sapiens*. Male sexual aggression is transformed into homicide, rationalized by a world religion that teaches that males must give up the old way of perpetuating their kind in preparation for a new revelation. The story's hero is Dr. Anne Alstein, the wife of a famous entomologist who has just ended the screwfly infestation in Florida by maladjusting the pest's reproductive cycle. At story's end she is possibly the last woman in the world, hiding out in the wilds of Canada disguised as a boy, and there she discovers what underlies the terror. In the woods near Hudson Bay she comes upon an alien being she quickly realizes to be a "real estate agent."

I think they've done whatever it is to us [Dr. Alstein realizes]. Made us kill ourselves off.

Why? Well, it is a nice place, if it wasn't for the people. How do you get rid of people? Bombs, death rays—all very primitive. Leave a big mess. Destroy everything, craters, radioactivity, ruin the place.

This way there's no muss, no fuss. Just like what we did to the screwfly. Pinpoint the weak link, wait a bit, while we do it for them. Only a few bones around; make good fertilizer.

"What do you think?"

"No. No. No. My patience is wearing thin."

### **Sequence 14. Becoming a writer.**

A title shows the year "1953." Alli Sheldon places the manuscript of a story in an envelope and seals it. A second title (after a fade to black) shows the year "1968." Alli Sheldon and

Ting sit at the breakfast table in their McLean, Virginia home. Alli absent-mindedly eats a bowl of cereal, concentrating on reading the *Washington Post*. Toast pops up, and as she begins to butter it and cover it from the contents of a jar that sits beside her place at the table, her attention becomes riveted on the label on the jar, which reads "Tiptree Orange Marmalade."

Cut to Alli Sheldon's study (the same room visited in the opening scene of the movie). Alli is addressing a large envelope which she has just sealed. In closeup we see her affixing a return address to the envelope:

James Tiptree, Jr.  
PO Box 1192  
McLean, VA

### **Sequence 16. Tip.**

Over a blank screen dividing this scene from the preceding one, we hear Alli say:

*"It's a perfect example of Tiptree's basic narrative instinct. Start from the end and preferably 5,000 feet underground on a dark day and then DON'T TELL THEM."*

At a United States Post Office in Northern Virginia, Alli Sheldon finishes writing a postcard. In close-up we see that she has filled virtually every centimeter of blank space on the card with tightly packed handwriting) and then affixes a stamp and drops it in the mail.

She then opens a post office box and extracts a large stack of mail inside. Over these images we hear a male voice (Robert Silverberg's) read the following:

"Because Tiptree lives just a few miles from the Pentagon or at least uses a mailing address in that vicinity, and because in his letters he often reports himself as about to take off for some remote part of the planet, the rumor constantly circulates that in "real" life he is some sort of government agent involved in high-security work. . . .

"It has been suggested that Tiptree is female, a theory I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing. . . .

"[Like Hemingway] there is [a] prevailing masculinity about [Tiptree's writing]—that preoccupation with questions of courage, with absolute values, with the mysteries and passions of life and death as revealed by extreme physical tests, by pain and suffering and loss."

### **Sequence 17. The Women Men Don't See**

The office of the studio exec again: "What else do you have for me? My patience is wearing thin."

"A small plane is forced to make an emergency landing in the Yucatan. A single mother, Ruth Parsons, a seemingly normal librarian for a federal government agency, and her daughter are on board, along with a Hemingwayesque narrator. When squid-like alien beings later appear, and offer the mother and daughter the opportunity to return with them to an unknown extraterrestrial destiny, they accept, to the great amazement of the narrator, who concludes that Ruth Parsons is insane. It's called 'The Women Men Don't See.' What do you think?"

"Get out."

**Sequence 18. Found Out.**

In McLean Virginia, Alli Sheldon answers a late evening phone call and learns that her mother has died.

Dissolve to a second phone call. Alli Sheldon (again) answers the phone. We hear the voice on the other end of the line ask "Is James Tiptree there?"

**Sequence 19. The End.**

Alli Sheldon, drinking a glass of wine and smoking a cigarette. She is being interviewed in the living room of the house in McLean, VA. Ting is visible in the background wrapped in a blanket, watching TV from a chair only two feet from the set. A young man in a sport coat is recording the conversation on a tape recorder. We hear her say the following:

*"I'll never let myself outlive him. His eyesight's going. He has to sit right on top of that set now to see anything. If things get too bad, I'll kill us both. Unless of course I die first."*

She laughs, taking another hit off her cigarette, and begins to cough. The camera pulls in for a close-up on a prominent scar on her neck, the result of recent open-ear surgery.

**Sequence 20. Coda**

Over a montage of brief shots:

1. Alli Bradley as a child (age 5) plays with a young African child.
2. Alli Bradley as a child (age 10) paints at an easel.
3. Alli Bradley repairs a Lionel train set.
4. Alli Bradley (in her late 20s) sits at a desk examining aerial reconnaissance photographs with a magnifying glass.
5. Alli Sheldon and Ting feeding thousands of chickens.
6. Alli and Ting duck hunting. Alli fires a rifle with ease and confidence.
7. Alli Sheldon in business suit walking into the Central Intelligence Agency.
8. Alli repairing a toaster.
9. Alli in a lab coat conducting an experiment.
10. Alli at a typewriter.
11. Alli with a gun to her head.

We hear Alli read from "The Women Men Don't See."

*"Women have no rights, Don, except what men allow us. Men are more aggressive and powerful, and they run the world. When the next real crisis upsets them, our so-called rights will vanish. . . . We'll be back where we always were: property. And whatever has gone wrong will be blamed on our freedom, like the fall of Rome was. You'll see."*

Ruth Parsons in "The Women Men Don't See"

At the words "You'll see" we again hear (as in the opening scene) a gun shot ring out. As the closing credits come up, we hear these words (from Mark Siegel):

Alli was a spy from the day she was born. Always in a foreign city, remembering the details, suicide a real option if they tried to take your truth. Good at hiding, not a frightened fugitive, but the agent who can pretend he's one of you. She liked best the people who found her out.

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