



“A Fun-Loving Girl with a Zest for Life:” Sex, Death, and Punishment in *Lake Mungo*

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Abstract

The faux documentary *Lake Mungo* (2009) chronicles the paranormal events that befall an Australian family after the drowning death of their teenage daughter, Alice. Troubled by sounds, photos, and video footage which suggest that Alice is not ‘gone,’ they embark on a series of efforts to find her. When they stumble upon a hidden ‘sex tape’ of Alice involved in an enthusiastic ménage a’ trois with the couple next door, they learn that the ‘fun loving girl with a zest for life’ has become a sexually transgressive woman. This study focuses on manifestations of the implied ‘punishment’ accorded Alice for her behavior which is suggested to be of both a temporal and spatial nature and meted out by both Puritanical supernatural agents and her own family. The former are presumably responsible for Alice’s ensuing premonitions of her death in which she finds herself trapped in her own drowned body as well as the drowning itself. However, Alice’s subsequent confinement to the family house as a ghost-like entity who watches but cannot interact is implied to be the result of her family’s refusal to let her go. In their various grief-stricken efforts to ‘raise’ her from the dead—from literally digging up her body, to faking manifestations of her in death—they have resurrected and ‘trapped’ her. Yet once they learn of her statutory rape, her subsequent traumatic premonitions, and discover presumably consolatory evidence that Alice is now with them in the house, they decide to sell and move away. This final, seemingly hostile act, would appear to be the final punishment-- her temporal and spatial isolation apparently deemed to be an apt fate for a ‘good girl’ gone bad.

Keywords

Paranormal, sexual transgression, punishment, doppelganger, rape, premonitions

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Joel Anderson's faux found-footage documentary *Lake Mungo* (2009) purports to be an investigation into the paranormal events that befall an Australian family and their community after the drowning death of their teenage daughter, Alice. Troubled by seeming poltergeist behavior in their home, a series of increasingly vivid dreams about Alice, and photos and video 'sightings' of the girl, Alice's family comes to believe that Alice's ghost is haunting them. The question is—why? As they vacillate from one conclusion to another in their bizarre 'search' to communicate with her, their feelings are affected by the revelation of Alice's secret and somewhat kinky sex life, as well as evidence that Alice experienced some terrifying premonitions of her death. Paradoxically, just as they receive conclusive video evidence that Alice is with them in their house, the Palmers inexplicably decide to move away. The implication is that in their grief, the Palmers summoned their daughter back from the dead, but in their upset at her transgressive sexual behavior, 'decide' to abandon her again---a 'punishment' deemed to be fitting for Alice Palmer, a good girl gone 'bad.' As a result, *Lake Mungo* is an often incoherent text—a chronicle of mourning which twists and turns as the 'normal' and paranormal converge in a story of mourning, obsession, anger, apprehension, entrapment, punishment, and ultimately, abandonment

Sometime in the late afternoon of December 21, 2005, while on a family vacation at Norville Dam, Alice Palmer and her brother Matt had gone swimming out to the dam itself and had stopped to rest. Matt decided to swim back, while Alice wanted to stay a bit longer. Alice's body was found three days later. The odd thing about this incident is that neither the local authorities nor the Palmer family found anything suspicious about Alice's drowning. It was a peaceful day on the water, Alice could swim, and there were no signs of her becoming entangled or caught in any sort of impediment...she just simply, inexplicably drowned. According to ensuing local news reports Alice's death "rocked the little seaside town of Ararat." Alice Palmer is described—rather innocuously—as a "vibrant, fun-loving girl with a zest for life," as we see family vacation footage taken on the day of her death, which shows a seemingly happy and smiling Alice mugging on camera for her family.¹

The 'haunting' of the Palmers begins within a few months of Alice's death. Her father, Russell, explains in an interview that unusual phenomena began to happen in the house. There were strange noises on the roof, and the door to Alice's room was heard repeatedly slamming—to the extent that the Palmers had the door rehung and exterminators were called. Alice's younger brother, Matt Palmer, also developed strange bruises on his body which doctors could

¹ According to the film's cinematographer, John Brawley, *Lake Mungo* is a supernatural mystery and ghost story told as a documentary that explores just how the dead can forever haunt the living.... Our knowledge of her [Alice Palmer] comes firstly from the families own re-told recollections, then her photographs and home movies. The aim was to paint a picture of someone from the visual evidence she left behind." (Brawley)

not explain...and then they disappeared. A family friend told the filmmakers that there was “just a bad feeling in that house.”

Then one night, after work, Russell Palmer had gone into his daughter’s room where he has a vision:

...and I didn’t know why –I found myself sitting in the chair by the dresser...trying to work out what I was doing there ...and Ally walked in and went to the desk, shuffled some pencils, and checked text messages on the phone...I was freaked out...I moved and she went completely rigid and I knew that she knew I was there...then she turned around—looked me right in the eye for it felt like forever--came at me and said ‘get out--get out!’

Russell’s experience leaves him traumatized and sobbing—convinced that not only is his daughter present in the house, but that she has also developed antagonistic feelings towards him.

Why is Alice so angry? Unlike the usual narrative trope—which has the deceased haunting their loved ones and refusing to rest until the mystery of their murder is solved and perpetrators brought to justice—there is no question of murder...or suspicious circumstances. However, the Palmer family act as if they were somehow complicit in her death. In interviews June, Russell, and Matthew seem subdued to the point of detachment--speaking in hushed tones and with restrained facial expressions and body language to suggest their grief, but simultaneously the idea that they are choosing their words carefully—as if they are afraid of saying ‘too much.’ There is also the fact that June expresses feelings of guilt---“you have to believe you’re to blame or else there’s nothing left to hold on to.” This is corroborated by June’s mother who explains that in her reserve she had not given herself “fully” to June and that June might have passed that reserve to Alice as well. She goes so far as to suggest that If June had been more loving, “...maybe then Alice would be alive.”

Soon the subjective experience of the Palmers becomes shared by the community of Ararat as a series of photos and video footage emerge which contain blurry figures believed to be Alice. She is first seen standing near the edge of the frame in a photo Matt takes of the backyard, while two different sources in the neighboring community confirm a seeing a vague figure that looks like Alice wandering around Norville Dam—the site of Alice’s drowning—though the images are so indistinct that a clear identification is impossible.²

² In explaining the photographic concept behind the film, Brawley explained that Anderson wanted to “interrogate visual images... and how the audience would view these images. He wanted to really look at what happens when we present an audience with apparent visual proofs only to then undermine it and really question what they were looking at...The closer you looked the harder it would be to see what was happening. The more we’d peer into the images to try to enhance them the less conclusive they would be.” Toward that end, Brawley claims

As a result, June and Matt begin to think Alice is still alive. These manifestations cause Matt to set up video cameras in the house which capture more grainy footage of a shadowy character sitting against the wall...and then of a figure which seems to walk by the camera. Though equally unclear, Russell claims that “this new footage was very different—significantly more detailed and impossible to dismiss as shadow play...there was something inexplicable in our house that was beyond death...”³ Due to these images and the doubts expressed by June and Matt, Russell comes to believe that though he actually identified the swollen, distorted, drowned body of Alice in the morgue, he was mistaken, which prompts them to exhume Alice’s body for confirmation.

When DNA evidence confirms that Alice is dead, June’s upset is compounded by another revelation: upon further examination of the images in some of the video taken at Norville Dam the figure looks more like Matt than Alice. Matthew admits to this ruse and more—that he had manufactured all of the ‘sightings’ of Alice by manipulating images from existing photos and family videos—including the vision of Alice in her room which so traumatized Russell. The ultimate manifestation of his bizarre efforts to resurrect his sister is his donning her jacket and walking the places she used to walk—*becoming* her.

“It wasn’t about trying to trick people,” Matt explained, “It’s that something was better than nothing...”⁴

While Matt had been manipulating reality to keep his sister ‘alive,’ June--feeling a misplaced sense of ‘blame’ for the loss of her daughter—had been incessantly watching these manipulated photos and video for signs of Alice’s existence. She had also begun having a series of vivid dreams about her. Though June had not seen her daughter’s body after her death-- explaining “Alice had been underwater all that time and I...I didn’t want to remember her in that way”—the version of her daughter June begins to experience in her dreams seems to be worse:

they shot using 40 diff cameras, with formats including 35 mm, Super 16, HD, Digital beta cam, Hi8, Super 8, VHS and even mobile phones. (Brawley)

³ Anderson elaborates, some of the themes in the film deal with memory, because it's tied in with grief. The way that grief is represented is very often through home movies, we show home movies and we show a lot of photographs. So the family has the time (to grieve). And I think one of the themes of the film... deals with how you deal with grief...basically what happens in the film is that there's a question about whether Alice, the girl who died, has returned as a ghost or some kind of entity; or whether that is actually a projection of a part of members of the family. But in a way those images of Alice that come, the images in photograph and video that there's no rational explanation for, they are like the last home movies of her. (Milfull).

⁴ Siding with Matthew, Anderson explains, “I think the potential...the idea that they might still exist, in a paranormal sense, that there might be something of them left behind...is incredibly strong and people have very strong affinity with that idea because it gives hope; it's a strange kind of hope, but it's better than nothing. So, I think those were the things I found quite compelling ideas for a story” (Milfull).

I started having nightmares so distressing that I didn't want to open my eyes. One vivid, recurring one was of Alice coming down the hall dripping from the dam and standing at edge of our bed staring at us...quite terrifying. By the end of February, it was so bad that I began taking long walks at night...sometimes for hours at a time...so I didn't have to go to bed at night and go to sleep. Sometimes I would go into people's houses...nothing wrong...just wanted to be in someone else's life for a while.

The implication is that, in her desperate efforts to keep her daughter 'alive,' June has summoned her back from the dead—her 'Alice,' but transformed into the Alice from the morgue—a drowned, distorted, doppelganger.

However, the idea that June's night terrors are not just the dreams of a bereaved mother is confirmed with the discovery of Alice's diary, in which she records having the same dream:

I had a dream last night. I was cold and wet and I felt heavy like I'd been drugged...and when I woke up the sensations didn't go. I was feeling sick and confused and I was starting to get scared. I needed to see mum...to talk to her. I stumbled to her room and I stood there at her bed...and as I stood there watching her I was overcome by this intense sadness then the sadness turned to fear. I just stood there paralyzed with fear and I realized that there was nothing that they could do for me anymore. I've never felt so utterly alone. Everything felt wrong...my body...the way things looked...then I realized that there was something wrong with me...I started to cry standing there...

With this revelation it becomes clear that Alice and her mother are having a 'shared' psychic experience. Further, this vision—described but not seen—becomes the most 'tangible' evidence presented of the assertion that supernatural forces are at play—that the 'haunting' of Alice Palmer is real.

Though Alice's dreams were experienced months before her death, and June's months after—mother and daughter are able to share the same temporal 'space'—where Alice now 'exists.' Unlike June's description of the dream, in Alice's version it is not what is seen but what is felt that renders it terrifying. She is not aware of having died or having drowned. She cannot see the wet, bloated, twisted, drowned incarnation she has become—but is conscious of both psychological and *physical* sensations. While she does not see herself, she becomes aware that she seems to be in her own body. She *feels* confusion, fear, and sadness, as well as the sensations of being cold, wet, heavy, and of moving towards her mother's room. Psychologically, she becomes *conscious* that something is "wrong with me"—of a *breakdown*—a separation between her psyche and the body she inhabits.

Alice *feels* she is a stranger in her body, while June *sees* 'the stranger.' June believes Alice has come back from her drowning—still wet from the dam--back to her home. Further, June now knows that this figure she refuses to

‘see’ and keeps running away from is not simply a horrifying apparition, but rather an entity capable of intentionality--her daughter trying to make contact with her. She understands that Alice’s identity is in flux—beginning some sort of psychic transition from physical death into a spiritual stasis—the ‘soul’ of Alice Palmer transitioning from the ‘corpse’ of Alice Palmer and into a personage of spirit. Though it seems to be a monster in a ‘bad dream’—Alice is in it, her mother sees it, and while Alice is “paralyzed with fear,” her terrified mother runs from it.

The implication is that with their efforts, Matt and June have summoned Alice back. However, unbeknownst to the characters, the Palmer home has become Alice’s *final* resting place—where she has been apprehended and entrapped in an alternate reality.

This suggestion is substantiated by more ‘sightings’ of Alice at the Palmer house. While Matt is gone on a trip, he sets the surveillance cameras in the house to continue recording. Upon his return, the family discovers that one of the cameras has picked up an unmistakable image of Alice sitting and looking into the camera. Encouraged, June begins a more intensive examination of the surveillance footage, determined to find more images of Alice—and so possibly more clues to the reasons for her continued presence in their home. In the process she comes across images of a male character crawling along the hallway to Alice’s room that she recognizes as Rhett Toowey, their former next door neighbor and father to the two children Alice used to babysit. Believing him to be looking for something in Alice’s room, the Palmers search it and find a videotape in Alice’s unlocked safe behind a false wall. The tape proves to be a ‘sex tape’ which seems to show Alice as a willing participant in what appears to be a *ménage a trois* with Toowey and his wife.

While Alice was only 16, establishing this action as ‘statutory rape,’ her participation does not seem to be unwilling (a fact which later prevents local police from pursuing the apprehension of the Tooweyes—who had recently moved away). However Alice’s behavior is difficult to interpret. Are these the cries of a girl losing her virginity, or moans of ecstasy during one of possibly many trysts Alice has had with the neighbors? Disturbingly, the relaxed, smiling expressions on the faces of Rhett Toowey and his wife as they watch Alice caught up in groaning orgasm suggest this is not the first time. If this is the case, how long had she been sexually active? Had there been other partners? Did Alice know the encounter was being taped at the time? When/how did she find out about the existence of the tape? When she did get possession of it why didn’t she destroy it?

In view of Alice’s presumed ‘rape’ the family scrambles to attach meaning and significance. Instead of feeling horror or disgust at the idea that her ‘innocent’ daughter was involved in this *ménage a trois*, June’s response is ‘sadness’ and she naively wonders if Alice had been in love with Rhett Toowey. Perhaps unable to consider another interpretation—the possibility that ‘Daddy’s little girl’ has become a sexually adventurous woman-- Russell

contends, “As far as I’m concerned, the Tooweys were complicit in Alice’s death...if it hadn’t been for them, she would have reached out for us...she wouldn’t have felt guilty---she wouldn’t have felt the burden of that secret...she wouldn’t have been isolated.” Russell seems to be vaguely suggesting Alice’s death might have been a suicide.

Understandably grasping at straws, Russell’s response reminds the viewer of the complex mire that has been created. Alice’s sexual activity is a visible fact, but her presumed shame and guilt are not only unfounded but also offer no connection to her death by accidental drowning. Reaching out for help from her family—or not—would have made no difference. But further, because the Palmers were so easily able to find the tape, they inexplicably presume that Alice *wanted* them to find it in order to “understand her better.” But why would Alice want her family to know of her sexual activity?

The revelation of Alice’s secret ‘sex life’ throws everything Alice’s family and friends believed they knew about her to be in question. As Alice’s friend Kim Whittle asserted, “secrets change the way that you see somebody...I think I knew one Alice...and her mother knew one...and then there was another one again that none of us knew...” While it is never overtly discussed, the idea that Russell believes Alice felt “ashamed” and “guilty” suggests a projection of her parents’ feelings about her actions. This implied moral judgement offers a key to explain the Palmer’s subsequent reactions to Alice’s return.

Upon further examination of Alice’s diary, June stumbles upon something else—Alice had labeled four days in August of 2005 with the words “*Lake Mungo*.” June recalls that these were the days when Alice attended a ‘school camp’ vacation at the legendary dry lake in south-eastern Australia,⁵ and that she had returned without her newly acquired cell phone, and favorite bracelet.

Presuming that information about this vacation might provide further insight into Alice’s death or the reasons for her haunting them, the family seeks out information about the experience from some of the other camp participants. From pieces of blurry cell phone footage provided by other girls at the campout, the Palmers discern that at one point Alice inexplicably walks away from her partying friends and towards the dunes--pointing her cell phone in front of her. Her slow moving, trance-like state suggests that she is possibly being summoned. A short while later Alice is seen staggering back into camp and burying something under a tree. The Palmers go to Lake Mungo, find the burial site and unearth Alice’s ‘favorite’ bracelet and watch as well as her cellphone. When the family plays the footage from the phone, it is from Alice’s perspective as she holds her phone in front of her and is walking away from the camp. A faint light appears in the distance and seems to be approaching her at the same pace that she is approaching it. As the light draws

⁵ Director Joel Anderson explained, ““We wanted locations that had both a sense of beauty and a sense of menace...Dying is a form of being lost, and these extraordinary places that feel haunted and so ancient perfectly reflect this.” (Thrower)

closer it proves to be a distorted figure of a person. While Russell recognizes the apparition as the dead, drowned Alice he had identified in the morgue, June sees the dead/drowned doppelganger version of Alice that had haunted the dreams of both mother and daughter. And just as the doppelganger came to her in a dream—it now does so again through Alice’s camera.

The recording suddenly stops. Like her mother, Alice had also run from the apparition. While there is no evidence to suggest that Alice had seen this entity in dreams prior to Lake Mungo, she does seem to *recognize* this ‘Other’ as the external manifestation of the traumatizing dream she had experienced. It is the body she found herself inhabiting as she stood at the foot of her mother’s bed. In essence, the screen of the cellphone has become a ‘mirror’ connecting the present to the future. This is reminiscent of a comment made by Ray Kimeny, a psychic that the Palmers’s had consulted after Alice’s death, who explained, “where I come from whenever someone dies they block out all the mirrors to keep them from finding their way back...” Now, just as her mother will do, Alice can run from this apparition, but in the future she will become this heavy, swollen, distorted creature.

The moment also seems the realization of the premonition Alice related to Kimeny in one of their sessions:

“I feel like something bad is going to happen to me. I feel like something bad has happened. It hasn’t reached me yet but it’s on its way...and it’s getting closer...and I don’t feel ready...I feel like I can’t do anything...”

The reaction of the Palmers is equally enigmatic. Instead of being upset at witnessing first-hand the truly disturbing premonitions that Alice had been living with from August until her death in December, the Palmers seem to be unmoved.

Upon returning to from their trip to Lake Mungo, the Palmers find that the ‘bad feeling’ in the house is gone. June explains:

“When we found out about the Tooweys...and what had happened at Lake Mungo... by the time we returned home...the house felt different. It was—calm. I think Alice wanted us to know more about her. She wanted us to know who she really was before she could leave. In the weeks and months after Lake Mungo we started to feel like a family again...”

June seems inexplicably at ‘peace’ with her loss. But as with many prior occurrences in the film, this seems a bizarrely unlikely end to the story. Why would Alice want her family to see the sex tape? Why would she want them to witness the horrifying premonition of her death at Lake Mungo? And why would learning of her statutory rape, her horrific dream of facing her mother after death, or the terrifying ‘waking nightmare’ of seeing the image of her death at Lake Mungo bring her family *comfort*?

The answer to this question is suggested by June's visits with Kimeny which—like their shared nightmare—provide another place/time for June and Alice to commune after her death. In a similar manner to their experience of the shared dream, Alice's encounter with him is months before her death, while June's is months after. Alice was seeking Kimeny's help in trying to understand a series of "nightmares which scare me a bit." Kimeny's process is a familiar form of psychotherapy in which he puts his clients into a trancelike state, asks them to go down the halls of their homes and open doors to rooms where they will encounter what they fear. Alice finds herself sitting in a chair in her bedroom as her mother enters, but believes her mother does not see her and leaves again. Months after her death June--trying to 'make contact' with Alice—has the same experience, but in her version she does see Alice, and then awakens to tell Ray, "she looks sad."

However, this experience will be repeated again in a final session June will have with Kimeny to confirm—in her mind—that the 'haunting' is over. In this session, again June goes down the hall and into Alice's room, but just as she speaks of entering Alice's room she abruptly comes out of the trance and with a stony expression says that Alice is not there. Her cold tone and demeanor suggest that she refuses to *acknowledge* that Alice is there...the implication being that the discovery of Alice's 'secret' life has changed her feelings towards her daughter.

These developments suggest that as a result of Matt's manipulations of photography and June's psychic abilities, they have effectively summoned Alice back from 'the Dead.' Alice is now 'in residence' at the Palmer house. This meant that the Palmers could now continue to live in the house as a 'family,' which would seem to be the desired result of their efforts to keep her memory alive. Logically, they would even feel a greater closeness to her by virtue of learning of the trauma she went through as a result of the premonitions of her death. However, the revelation of Alice's sexually transgressive behavior has had a greater impact--resulted in their collectively *deciding* that she is gone. Instead of being more understanding and empathetic, and wanting to stay in the house with her, they instead choose to turn their backs on her. The Palmers decide to move away.

In the final shots of the film, the filmmakers again show us familiar photos Matt had manipulated to suggest Alice was present. However instead of the blurry figures, Alice is now clearly visible. Instead of the more active haunting that has been suggested throughout the film—we see an Alice who is inert—looking as if she is incapable or uninterested in making contact with her family...and we are reminded of Alice's sad realization while standing over her mother in a dream, that "there was nothing" her family could do for her anymore. Alice seems aware that just as they have moved on—they have also left her behind. They are released...she is not.

In *Lake Mungo* there is no recovery. There is entrapment and abandonment. The implication of the transpired events is that by virtue of seemingly virginal

Alice's transgressive adolescent sexual activity she is now beyond redemption and damned to stay a ghostlike resident at the empty Palmer home. While the Palmers had been distraught at Alice's death, upon learning of her traumatic premonitions of her death and that she is now at the house—with them—causes them, paradoxically, to be at peace and decide to leave. The implication is not just that they have mourned the loss and are ready to move on, but that upon 'getting to know her better'—as June put it—they have decided that they want to forget her. They don't *need* her anymore. While there was nothing they could do for her, there is also nothing *she* can do for *them*.

In the final photo taken of the family in front of the house before they leave, we see Russell, June, and Matthew framed in the foreground against the front door, but in the background, we now see Alice watching as her family leaves...standing with what seems to be other ghostly entities—perhaps others who have been left behind by loved ones who believe them gone, or—like the Palmers—simply no longer want them and have *decided* they are gone.

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