

Woman's ill and set for her own funeral

Before disease silences her, feisty Alice Kidd plans a church service of laughs and appetizers.

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH
The Kansas City Star

She knows death is near, just a whisper away.

It flirts with her body by the hour.

But Alice Kidd has a message she wants those she loves to hear: "Don't fear death."

She called The Kansas City Star. "I'm a cranky old broad, and I'm throwing myself one helluva party. Wanna write about it?"

A funeral, says the 63-year-old, while she's still here. A living visitation.

Kidd, in a wheelchair, uses a cane to propel herself across the patio. Haphazard gray hair. Lipstick and a little eye shadow, beautiful deep blue eyes. She smiles, enjoying the sunshine and the beauty from a cluster of pink roses in the little garden at the Riverside Nursing and Rehabilitation Home.

She wears a pink stretchy tank top that says *Fragile*.

She leans in close.

"I'm the most fragile damn thing they've ever seen here. I'm a feisty old bitch, too."

She chuckles, a croupy sound rattling up from diseased lungs that have battled pneumonia, asthma and bronchitis.

No matter.

She takes another long pull on her Eve ultra-slim cigarette.

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"You want some? They taste pretty good."

Kidd's dream is to get the word out about her service, reaching far-flung friends and anyone else who cares to come. Her date is set: June 12, at Grace Baptist Church.

She has things she wants to say. Laughs to share. Apologies to deliver.

"But no eulogy. That'd be too uncomfortable because I'd be sitting right there."

She knows she may have waited too long. But "God isn't ready for a nine-fingered Baptist church pianist. That's why I'm still here."

Kidd shows off nine perfectly oval, perfectly painted coral nails. One middle fingertip is gone, amputated years before.

"Smashed the finger bone on a teeter-totter accident," she says.

She sold cars for 20 years, "never spoon-feeding anybody a car they didn't need."

She's learned a lot about people. But it's in her dying that she says she's learned the most.

"You've got to clean up your messes before you go. You don't get much time here, not really. You need a little faith, not much. ... The closer I get, the more certain I am there's nothing to fear on the other side."

She leans in close again.

"The real pain," she whispers, "is all here. I'm here to tell you that I don't have fear. There's no pain. I found out dying is painless. They give you really good drugs, and all I have to do is ask."

She laughs, but then those blue eyes grow big and somber.

"Now, you have to have your deep sobbings, your pity party. You gotta do that for yourself. You just can't bring everybody else down."

Every morning she holds her own sobbing rituals, usually while she's sitting out among the roses just as the sky glows pink, when the world seems fresh and clean and new again.

She waits after she says that, letting this moment wrap around her. A nurse chatters to another patient. A lawn mower roars several yards over. In the distance, traffic speeds along a thin ribbon of road.

She reflects on how she came to this place in her life. A decade ago she learned she had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. One day her body would refuse to breathe.

She braced for it. She'd find the upside. She'd live longer.

She grew up on a small farm outside St. Joseph, one of six daughters who gardened and canned and lived close to the

land. Theirs was a family that suffered, too.

Her older sister had polio. Two of her younger sisters died in a half-frozen pond. They were 6 and 8. The loss still makes her cry.

She draws a deep, raggedy breath.

"If you turn over any rock in families, you'll find tragedies. But you have to live with them. That's why I want to do this. I want other people to understand a death sentence doesn't have to be all depression and tears. Find the humor. ... Dull, sober people are not my bag."

She graduated from Stanberry High School in 1964. Sold cars at Bill Woods Ford. Married twice and divorced twice.

"Divorce is easy — it's marriage that's hard," she says. But her second husband has been her best friend for the past 37 years. She has one son of whom she is very proud.

The idea of throwing herself a funeral came 20 years ago. She toyed with it, imagining how she'd do it, wondering if life would give her the chance.

"Appetizers at 1 p.m., so the stragglers wouldn't be considered late. Service at 1:30. Lots of flowers and jokes."

There'd be music, too.

"People don't realize there's so much in the art of living. People don't know the amount of good there is to reflect on a

daily basis."

And then her breathing grows more difficult. The sunshine turns hot. She needs to rest.

She pushes herself toward the double doors.

"You know, I'll be really pissed if the doctors are wrong, and I have to do a second or even a third living visitation."

And she laughs once more.

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Within hours of her interview last Tuesday, Alice Kidd was taken to North Kansas City Hospital. Sunday evening, she was in intensive care.

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