

Alma

Again the girl eases into water. Legs, hips, then shoulders—her body dissolves and maroons her head, a sinking blonde island in a blue map. She looks like me; I'm half sure I'm watching myself vanish into the sea. Each morning I watch to see if my own grieving head emerges from the waves, or stays beneath.

October. I've lived two hundred coffees, six hundred cigarettes, and two months of uncatalogued regret at the bottom of Alabama. Last night my bedroom lamp burned out. When I opened a window, ghostly moonlight poured into my dread-soaked bed. I lay awake, drowning until morning.

Where does your life go?

I've been alive thirty-eight years. What kind of arc is *that*?

The school where I worked for fourteen years closed down: a portion of my idle heart shuttered with it. I had no husband, no kids, not even a *cat*. Friends and boyfriends disappeared years before. When my mediocre students disappeared too, I sat in my kitchen smoking, haunted by hours I no longer wanted or knew how to spend. My life was a brittle remainder of unmade choices, so I made a rash decision and acted on it, even knowing it to be a bad one. I junked the prim dregs of civilization (prim ceramic mugs, prim shoes, prim paperbacks, prim pantyhose), packed my antique lamp into the rheumatic Subaru, headed to Dauphin Island—where no one knew my name—and leased the first ramshackle house I found.

The second day, I took the ferry across Mobile Bay to Gulf Shores and drove to the nearest Walmart so I could acquire the equipment for living: dollar flip flops, dimmable night lamp, a two-pound tub of hummus, pita chips, and, because I felt particularly grim, an acrylic painting of a bald eagle. On the way back, I sat in my car and gazed at the Gulf. The lapping water pulled me back to the prairie I'd run from, rolling seas of wheat and soybean.

Six years ago, I got a call from Ed Pearson, a lawyer in Alma, Nebraska. The closest thing my father had to a friend. Pearson raspingly told me my father had “passed.”

“Doc said it was his heart.”

Silence from my end.

“He was an old man,” Pearson said, who by then must’ve been an old man himself. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Yes,” I said.

“He wanted his ashes spread in the old fields.” Pause. “Will you come?”

“No,” I said.

Though when I pictured old Pearson out in the fallow fields scattering my father, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel that high lonesome after I hung up.

I knew things had taken a bad turn when I started writing obituaries for myself: *Aliana Bailey, age indeterminate. She ate pita chips.*

I’m working on the second one when I hear a soft knock on the door.

Standing on my doorstep is *the girl* from the ocean. She’s young, maybe five or six, wearing a tiny raincoat even though it’s warm outside. She has a black eye. A small purple balloon swollen shut.

“I’m Alma,” the girl says, and waits patiently.

“Alma”—it’s been years since I said the word aloud, and it felt unlucky in my mouth—“my name is Aliana.”

“Aliana,” the girl says carefully.

We smile shyly at each other.

“Alma, are you okay? Where are your parents?”

The girl looks at the ground and shakes her head back and forth.

“Are you lost?”

She shakes her head some more.

I look down my lonely drive: no one. It’s early. My porch is the only lighted one on the block.

The girl looks up and blinks with her good eye.

“Would you like to come inside my house and eat something?”

The girl looks at me for several seconds before nodding.

We shuffle into my dining room and stare blankly at the sparse, windowless space.

I sit Alma at the card table and go into the kitchen, retrieving the only food in my house: pita chips.

I put a small bowl of pitas in front of Alma, who eats them carefully.

I sit with her.

After she eats, I give her some paper and a pen, “You can use these to draw, if you want, Alma.”

The girl tentatively picks up the pen, but soon scribbles blue ink all over the sheets. Her left leg begins to swing under the table.

I move my new lamp to the table and switch it on.

“Excuse me, Alma.”

I go to my bedroom and after consulting the phonebook, call Sheriff Tilden, a deep-fried voice that assures me, I “did the *right* thing.”

When I go back to the dining room, I hear the girl singing, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” from *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*. I stand there, listening. *I* used to sing that song.

“Alma,” I say, sitting down at the table, “I called somebody.”

She looks at me. Her swinging leg halts like the pendulum in an unwound clock.

“There are people who can help you,” I say smiling, though my mouth feels heavy.

Alma has stopped drawing. The pen is frozen in her hand. She lowers her head like a wilted flower.

I want to cry: her heart has plummeted. So has mine.

We sit there.

Girls terrified of dark.

Fathers that aren’t fathers.

Feelings I wish had stayed buried in Alma, Nebraska.

I want to tell Alma that she would be okay, because *I* wanted to be okay. But I say nothing, and we sit in my kitchen in silence, until we hear the slow crunch of car tires on my driveway. Footsteps. Knocking. Much louder than Alma’s.

I find a tall, severe blond man standing and shaking slightly on my doorstep.

“Ms. Bailey,” he says, “My name is Ben Daniels. I’m Alma’s father. I was contacted by Sheriff Tilden, he told me my daughter was at your address.”

“Yes,” I say.

“Alma,” the man barks at Alma, still seated at my card table, unresponsive.

The girl stares at the eagle painting.

Nobody has moved.

“Alma,” the man says again, “you need to come with me. We need to go *home*.”

Alma trembles for a minute before finally she looks at me.

“It’s okay,” I tell her, though she and I know nothing is okay.

“*Alma*,” the man says.

The little girl gets up, pushes her chair in, turns off the lamp, and looks at me, though I can’t bear to look back at her.

“Thank you,” she says quietly. She walks to her father, who turns and tells me, “Thank you,” as he closes my door behind them.

When the girl leaves my driveway and disappears completely I look down at the table. I see the furious blue-scribbled paper. I stare at it, then at the empty bowl next to it. The pen is gone. I let myself weep.