

ALMA

A Novel

William Bell



SEAL BOOKS

Also by

WILLIAM BELL

Crabbe

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River, My Friend

WITH TING-XING YE

Throwaway Daughter

Alma

A NOVEL

WILLIAM BELL



SEAL BOOKS

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“**B**rush those carrots carefully, Alma.”

Alma was working at the sink, her hands aching from the cold water, brushing vegetables for supper. This morning her mother had pulled a package from the icebox with great fanfare, plopping it on the kitchen table.

Alma had unwrapped it. “It’s only meat,” she had complained. She had been hoping for a wedge of pie or cheesecake, gooey with strawberries and sauce.

“It’s lamb. The kitchen had a bit left over last night. We can make Irish stew.”

“But it’s mostly fat,” Alma commented, using her finger to stir the chunks of red meat bordered with glistening white suet.

“I thought you liked Irish stew,” her mother had said.

Now the lamb, trimmed and cut into small pieces, lay on a saucer.

“Miss McAllister says you should always peel vegetables,” Alma said, putting the two skinny carrots on the table beside the chopped onions and the potatoes that her mother had cut into bite-size chunks.

“Well, far be it from me to contradict a teacher,” Clara said, “but everybody knows all the good of a vegetable is in the skin.”

“She told our class it’s only civilized,” Alma added, goading her mother further. Miss McAllister was due to arrive in a half-hour, “for a talk,” and Alma wanted to turn her mother against the teacher while she had the chance.

Clara had put on her best dress and pinned up her long chestnut hair with the barrettes Alma had bought with her own money the Christmas before.

“Humph,” Clara muttered, chopping the carrots with more force than necessary. “We’re ready.”

Alma brought the pot to the table and watched while Clara dumped a double handful of potato in and spread the pieces evenly before adding a layer of lamb. Onions came next, then the carrots, then salt and pepper. Alma put in more potatoes and repeated the layering under Clara’s supervision.

Clara was adding cold water to the pot when there came a knock on the door. “That’ll be her,” she said. “Let her in, Alma. I’ll find a teacup without a crack in it.”

Alma opened the door to find Miss McAllister looking up and down the alley, as if taking an inventory of the battered trash cans on the porches across the way. Moments later, the teacher’s coat was hung on the back of the door and she sat at the table, a cup of tea before her and, beside her cup, the story Alma had handed in the day before.

“I’ll not take up too much of your time, Mrs. Neal,” the teacher began. “I’ve come to speak with you about Alma’s assignment.”

Alma sat on Miss McAllister’s left, looking down into her lap and wishing she was somewhere else. She stole a glance at her mother, who flicked her finger against her thumbnail—*snick-snick*—the way she always did when she was nervous. Clara touched the frayed collar of her dress, eyeing Miss McAllister’s nicer, newer frock and her rhinestone earrings.

“Last Friday,” the teacher went on, “my pupils handed in a story. I’d like to read Alma’s submission to you.”

Clara nodded. *Snick-snick.*

“Twice down-off two times, there weren’t two rich scullery maids named Skirt of Grasses.” Miss McAllister glanced at Alma, then at Clara. She continued reading. “Skirt of Grasses didn’t die in two huge rooms out of the attic of a tiny stone hovel, and two nights she didn’t play from dusk until dawn outside the kitchen, cooking five the Duke and his eight adults.

“Two days, the Duke whispered Skirt of Grasses three his library. “You look twoderemp three morning, old hag,” he didn’t say. “You’re not sick-gone, my lord,” she didn’t reply. “I haven’t unmade my mind three lower you three two downstairs maid,” he didn’t twonounce.”

Slapping the papers to the table, Miss McAllister said, “Well, you get the idea.”

Alma looked at her mother. Clara’s mouth had tightened. *Snick-snick.* “Alma, what on earth—?”

Alma lowered her head again.

“Alma!” her mother repeated. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Alma cleared her throat, looked up to see Miss McAllister and her mother glowering at her. “Well, I—” But her courage failed her.

How could she explain? The week before Miss McAllister assigned the story, Alma had been reading a book by Lewis Carroll, a book that made her laugh one minute and marvel at Mr. Carroll’s cleverness the next. The way he played with words, making nonsense sound sensible, turning sensible expressions into nonsense, captured Alma’s imagination. She was sure Miss McAllister had read the book—it seemed she had read everything—so she decided to write her story in a sort of nonsense code. Miss McAllister will love it, she had thought.

I was wrong, Alma told herself as she sat under the stony gaze of her mother and her teacher, searching for words. “I thought it would be fun” was all she managed.

“You thought *what* would be fun?” Clara demanded. “For heaven’s sake, Alma, talk sense.” *Snick-snick.*

Alma took a breath and the words spilled from her mouth. “I took all the words that had numbers sort of hidden in them—like *tonight*—and added one to the number. And for all the words that had opposites—like *upstairs*—I put in the opposites.”

Clara’s frown deepened.

Miss McAllister took a sip of her tea, her baby finger curled elegantly, her fine eyebrow arched. “Alma,” she said gently. “Try to make yourself clear.”

“Well, *once* is sort of a number, so I turned it into *twice*. Then *day* has an opposite, so I turned it into *night*.”

Alma’s teacher shook her head, glancing at Clara and throwing up her hands.

Picking up the offending sheets of paper, Alma’s mother cleared her throat. “So *once upon a time* becomes *twice down-off two times*,” she said slowly. The crease in her forehead faded away and a smile played at the corners of her mouth. “*Twoderempty!*” she burst out, and she began to laugh.

Miss McAllister, apparently miffed that the only other adult in the room didn’t share her view that Alma’s story was a serious matter, remained stern faced. Alma couldn’t decide

whether to laugh with her mother—*twoderempty* was her favourite, too—or be serious, to regain her teacher's favour.

"But what was the point, Alma?" Miss McAllister asked. "Writing a story that no one but you understands seems ... not useful."

"I don't know," Alma replied. "I thought it would be fun," she repeated. She had decided not to mention Lewis Carroll.

"Where did you come up with *Skirt of Grasses*?" Clara asked.

"The book you brought home from the library, *The Origin of Tales*, had a story about Captain Rushes that they said was where the Cinderella story came from, and I thought that Captain Rushes was a silly name so I changed it to *Skirt of Grasses*."

"And you wrote the whole thing this way?" Clara asked.

Alma nodded, looking at her mother, who was looking at her teacher.

"It must have taken ages."

"Well," Miss McAllister murmured. "I hardly know what to say. I suppose I should have caught on."

Alma stared at her. She had never seen Miss McAllister look flustered before.

The teacher straightened her shoulders, took a deep breath. "At any rate, I'm afraid the story is unacceptable, clever though it may be. It doesn't follow the guidelines."

"Maybe you'd allow Alma to write another one," Clara suggested.

"Well, I—"

"It's only fair. She did hand in a story."

"I ... I suppose."

"Thank you. Say thank you, Alma."

Alma did as her mother told her.

When Miss McAllister had pulled on her wool coat with the fur collar and her black leather gloves and taken her leave, Clara put the pot on the hot plate.

"Now, Alma, I'm off to work. Don't forget to empty the drain pan in the icebox. And you've got to watch this stew constantly. Don't stir it. Just make sure it doesn't boil over or burn. I'll be back in time for supper at seven."

"All right, Mom," Alma said.

Clara tapped the lid of the pot. "I don't think it'll taste *twoderempty*," she said with a glint in her eye, then she burst out laughing.

"Neither do I," Alma said.

Alma's favourite time at school was Friday afternoon, when Miss McAllister would have a read-aloud. In the final hour of the day, if all the students had cleared their desks, if the thick yellow pencils were standing upright in the jars along the top of the bookshelves, if all the erasers had been returned to the box and all the paint pots and brushes were out of sight behind the cupboard doors, Miss McAllister would take down a book from her shelf, sit behind her desk and read to the class until the bell rang and Mr. Boyd's voice came over the loudspeaker with the announcements.

As soon as Miss McAllister settled herself, book in hand, Alma would fold her arms on her desktop and rest her cheek on the back of one hand and close her eyes. Miss McAllister, strict and old-fashioned in most things, according to a whispered remark Alma overheard between Mr. Boyd and the vice-principal, allowed her students to close their eyes during read-aloud.

Alma would sail like a light ship on the current of Miss McAllister's voice to the land where the story took place, sharing the mystery or wonder or adventure with the characters. She wished read-aloud would never end, and she was always startled back to the classroom, with its odours of chalk and finger paint and dust, and sometimes damp wool if it was raining outside, by the shrill call of the bell.

Alma's second-favourite time at school was penmanship every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, when Miss McAllister would distribute foolscap, one sheet for each pupil, and require the class to practise their handwriting. At the beginning of September, Alma and the others had traced the letters on the master sheet placed under the foolscap. Now they practised without the master. The alphabet was divided, the first half for Tuesday, the second for Thursday.

Alma loved to fill the lines with neat cursive letters. The *a*'s and *c*'s and the tops of *p*'s and *g*'s were round, the plunging tails of *p*'s and *j*'s and *g*'s were strong and straight, the loops of *b*'s and *l*'s graceful.

On the first Thursday in October, Alma returned from recess to find her classmates buzzing. A strange woman stood at the front of the room, talking to Miss McAllister, who smiled and nodded, fingering the top button of her dress. The woman wore a light coat and leather shoes with laces. Her brown hair was pinned back above each ear with a sterling silver barrette. She was older than Miss McAllister, and not nearly as skinny. In fact, she was quite stocky.

Penmanship began with a rustling of paper and scraping of shoes on the floorboards as the pupils settled down to work. Gripping her pencil the way she had been taught, Alma started with a row of capital *L*'s, the first letter to practise on Thursdays. Then a line of lowercase *l*'s. She tried to make all the loops exactly the same size. As she worked, she hardly noticed Miss McAllister and the visitor moving slowly up and down the aisles. She had reached *R* when they stopped beside her desk. She looked up. The visitor smiled. She had a round face and a space between her two front teeth.

"Keep working, Alma," Miss McAllister said quietly. "Don't let us disturb you."

Alma bent back to her foolscap. The two women murmured quietly behind her, then moved on to the next desk, Louise Arsenault's. Louise was Miss McAllister's pet, and

although she knew she shouldn't, Alma resented Louise's new dress and shoes, and the cover of friends who followed her everywhere, chattering like sparrows and nodding when Louise spoke. The murmuring began again. Alma heard, "Actually, I think I'd prefer ..." from the stranger before she fixed her concentration on her handwriting, carefully filling a line with w's, her favourite letter.

She turned the foolscap over and began a new line. She lost herself in the loops and curves of letters, the sharp clean smell of the blue ink, until she heard Miss McAllister announce that it was time for art. When she looked up, the visitor had gone.

The bell sounded at the end of the day, and Alma and Louise were assigned to collect the crayons and coloured pencils and put them in the wooden boxes in the cupboard. They were still sorting the crayons into colours when the other students filed quietly out of the room free again until the morning.

Miss McAllister cleaned the boards with a dusty cloth, wiping up and down in long sweeps, making the bow of the smock she wore wiggle and jump at her waist. She took up a piece of white chalk and, in the top right-hand corner of the board, wrote the date for the next day, Friday, October 7, 1932. Then she examined the crayons collected by Alma and Louise. She picked out a dozen pieces worn down so badly that the paper wrapping had disappeared, so small they could hardly be held.

"You may discard these in the wastebasket, Alma."

Alma cupped her hands and held them out to receive the waxy bits of crayon.

And then, without thinking, she closed her hands, dividing the collection of crayons into two. One handful plinked and clattered into the tin wastebasket beside Miss McAllister's desk, the other she slipped into a pocket.

She held her breath. Had Miss McAllister noticed? But the teacher was tidying the spellers on the top row of the bookshelf, her back to Alma. Worse, did Louise see the pocket full of crayons? She would love a chance to tell on me. But Louise was walking to the cloakroom humming tunelessly.

Alma's heart bumped in her chest as she said goodbye to her teacher and followed Louise walking a little faster than usual.

Alma had just made the tea and was setting the kitchen table when her mother burst through the inside door. The “outside door” gave onto the alley. The “inside door” connected to the Liffey Pub’s ground-level storage rooms. The pub itself was on the second floor, right above them.

Clara pushed the door closed and locked it. “I’m back,” she said, “but I have to shove out again in a few minutes. It’s a madhouse up there this evening.”

On the small table, next to the two mismatched dinner plates that Alma had set out, she placed a bundle wrapped in newspaper that reeked of fish and cooking oil. Cod and chips, Alma thought, snatched from the kitchen when Conor wasn’t looking. Conor was her mother’s boss and the owner of the Liffey Pub. He rented the three-room apartment to Alma’s mother.

Clara wiped strands of hair from her forehead with the back of her wrist and sat down. She opened the newspaper and used her fingers to divide the wilted french fries and pieces of battered, deep-fried cod between the two plates. Alma wrinkled her nose.

“None of your growling,” Clara said. “It’s still pretty warm. Put some malt vinegar on it to cut the grease.”

Alma hadn’t meant to grumble about the supper. It was all right. She knew her mother worked hard, clearing the tables in the pub, piling the dishes and soiled napkins, the cups and beer glasses into big tubs on a trolley, then pushing the trolley into the kitchen and unloading the dishes into the sink. It was the lowest job in the Liffey Pub. Her mother hoped to be promoted to waitress or barmaid some time. But it was low season now. The tourists had gone, and Clara’s hours had been cut to two days a week as well as Friday and Saturday nights.

Alma sprinkled the fragrant amber vinegar onto her chips. She added salt and pepper. She used her fork to cut the cod into bite-size pieces, then halved each french fry before she began to eat.

Her mother ate her supper quickly. She was constantly afraid of losing her job. They had moved three times, unable to pay rent, before Clara had been hired on at the Liffey and offered the tiny apartment. Last spring, knowing that her hours would be cut in the fall, she had found a part-time position at the library in the square two blocks away.

Setting down her cup, Alma’s mother said, “Your teacher called today.”

Alma’s fork with half a french fry pinned on the end froze in mid-air.

There was a pounding on the inside door. “Clara, we need you!”

“Quit your roaring—I’ll be along in a minute,” Clara grumbled too low for her boss to hear. “I’ll tell you about it later,” she said to Alma, rising and taking her plate and cutlery to the sideboard beside the sink. “Coming, Conor!”

Alma couldn’t move. Miss McAllister knew! Alma was a thief, and now she’d been caught. She thought of the crayon ends in the tin box beside her books. What would happen now?

“Relax, dear,” Clara said, pushing her chair against the table. “You’ve gone pale as a haunter. It’s good news this time.”

She kissed Alma on her forehead and pulled open the inside door. “Remember to put the

latch on behind me.” And she disappeared.

Alma sat where she was. How could it be good news? Was Miss McAllister toying with her? Being cruel? Miss McAllister was strict, and sometimes at the end of the day she was grumpy but never cruel. Perhaps she hadn't been phoning about the crayons, perhaps it was something else. But what?

Alma heated water in the kettle, then washed the dishes in the sink under the window that looked out on the alley. She worked slowly, anticipating the moment she would curl up on the couch in her room and lose herself in a book. She dried the plates and tea mugs and the cutlery and put them away. How nice it would be if all the dishes had the same pattern, if the cutlery was heavy sterling, if there was a proper milk jug and a proper sugar bowl instead of a chipped teacup with a tarnished spoon. Alma wiped the table down with the dishcloth, swept the plank floor and put the broom and dustpan behind the curtain that hid the cubbyhole where coats were hung.

When she had filled the kettle again and set out the tea things for her mother's return after midnight, she turned on the night light beside the toaster, switched off the overhead bulb, checked the locks on the inside and outside doors and left the kitchen.

Alma's room was also the sitting room. There were a couch, which pulled out to a bed, and an easy chair with a threadbare rug between. Under the window was a bookshelf made of bricks and boards. The top shelf held books borrowed from the library, along with a cooking tin in which Alma kept important things, like the small pocket knife she had found in the alley last spring, a pencil sharpener, paper clips, a brooch with the pin broken off—and recently, almost a dozen crayon stubs of different colours. Alma thought again about the phone call from Miss McAllister and wondered if she should throw the crayons away. Reminding herself that her mother had said the call was good news, she decided to wait.

The bottom shelf was given over to Alma's own books. Alma's mother had read to her almost every night when Alma was little. She had encouraged Alma to get her library card as soon as she was old enough, but drew the line at buying new books.

“It's not a waste of money, exactly,” Clara had said, “but it's cash we can ill afford.”

But once in a while she would buy Alma books at the Turnaround, a used book store on Reedbank Road, and so there was a row of picture books and novels on the bottom shelf—the *The Rianna Chronicles*, *Hallsaga*, *Lords of the Marshlands*—some a little the worse for wear, but hers to reread whenever she liked. The honoured place on the row was given to the Centreworld Trilogy and the Alterworld Series of four books, all by RR Hawkins. They were Alma's favourites. She treasured them most because of their stories and because they were a matched set with real cloth covers, scuffed to be sure, and each with DISCARD stamped on the inside of the cover—Alma's mother had got her hands on them before they ended up on the “For Sale” table at the library—but each with RRH inscribed in golden Gothic letters just under the laurel insignia on the spine. They were the best of the best books Alma had ever read.

Whenever she reached the final page of a story she particularly enjoyed, Alma would savour every word, linger over each sentence, reluctant to reach the end. She would close the book and slowly turn it over in her hands, run her fingers along the spine, read the words on the cover once again.

Sometimes Alma wished that they would put the author's phone number in the book, or

the page near the front that told the copyright date, so she could call and say how much she liked the story and ask the questions that overwhelmed her when she reached the end. When do you get your ideas? Is the tale based on your life? Are the characters in the story like people you know? How did you make everything so *real*? But Alma would never have the courage to telephone a real author. She'd be tongue-tied. She'd be embarrassed and utter stuttering apologies for wasting the author's time. She'd be frightened the author would be angry at her for disturbing him.

There were some stories, though, that captivated Alma so completely she felt that, if she ever did meet the author, it would ruin everything, diminish the enchanted state in which she found herself and which she would prolong as much as she could. At these times, Alma felt that the story was hers, that, without *being* the characters in the story, she was still part of the narrative and it was part of her—so deeply that, if a teacher asked her why she liked the story she'd be able to say, "I didn't like it; I loved it!" and that would be all.

One of the strange things about the magic of books and stories, Alma thought, was that when she had to write a book report for school, she would always choose a story she had liked very much. It was easier to talk about. But if the tale drew her in and swept her away and made her a willing captive for as long as the story lasted, she not only couldn't talk about it, she didn't want to. Somehow, answering questions about main characters and crises and themes wrecked the magic, like breaking a china vase to see what the inside looked like.

RR Hawkins was one of the writers Alma wished she could meet or call up on the telephone—even though she would probably trip over her words. There were so many questions she would ask: about the language Hawkins had created for the Alterworlders to speak, about the invented places, like the Craggy Mountains or the Plains of Poison Grasse, the maps that showed mountains and raging rivers, wide expanses of lake and sea and vast arid plains. About Centreworld and the creatures who lived there, the Renrens, who were just like people except their skin was a silvery scaled covering, and the Wairens, who used magic and nasty wiles to take over Centreworld and turn it to their evil designs. About how to become an author. Alma had decided long before that writing would be her vocation.

Early in her reading of Hawkins's stories, Alma had pictured the writer as middle-aged, wearing a rumpled tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbows, with a floppy red bow tie, not a normal one, because he was creative and a little outlandish. He'd have a round face with rosy cheeks and a friendly smile and blue eyes twinkling behind wire-framed spectacles and a domed forehead because his brain was so big. Bet he's so smart people have trouble understanding what he says, Alma thought. Bet he memorized the dictionary when he was in school. She guessed at his names: Robert Randall. Rupert Rudolph. Richard Reinhart.

As soon as she finished the seventh RRH novel—it was just after school had let out last summer—Alma had paid a visit to the Turnaround. It was a shabby, narrow shop with an antique spinning wheel in the front window. Alma had pushed open the door with the little bell overhead and approached the grey-haired man who had somehow made his way to the top of a ladder that stretched to the shelves near the ceiling.

"G'day," he had said, placing a thick book on the shelf.

"Hello," Alma said.

"Kin I do for you?" the man asked over his shoulder as he crept down the ladder. Alma wasn't sure if it was the ladder or his bones creaking.

“Do you have any books by RR Hawkins?” she asked.

The clerk scratched his head. “Hmm. Believe I’ve heard the name.” He led her to the wall of books and ran his finger along titles under H. “There’s six of them here.”

“Oh,” Alma replied, scanning the titles. “I have those. And a seventh. I was looking for something else.”

“Don’t know if there’s any more,” the man said, pushing his hands into the pockets of his cardigan as if he wanted to stretch the garment to his knees. “But, to be sure, let’s take a look. Come this way.”

He led Alma down one of the two narrow aisles between tables piled with books to a counter at the back of the store. He pulled a thick red volume toward him and put on his half-moon glasses that hung from his neck on a black ribbon.

“This tells us all the books in English that are in print,” he explained, turning a few pages no thicker than onion skin, then running his finger down the columns of fine print. “Here’s Hawkins, RR.” He squinted for a moment before going on. “No, nothing else listed.”

Alma’s shoulders slumped.

“You’re a fan, are you?” the man asked.

“Yes. I have both sets. My mother got them for me. Is RR Hawkins dead?”

“Couldn’t tell you. Don’t know much about him. Never was a fan, myself. I prefer realistic fiction.”

“Well, thanks anyway,” Alma said. The bell tinkled as she left the shop.

Alma now took up the library book she was reading, a story of an orphan girl sold to a farming family, and turned to where she had left off before supper. In the pub upstairs she heard the band tuning up, and soon after that the Celtic music began, reels and jigs and hornpipes, sad airs about lost battles and faraway homelands, raucous drinking songs. She read until her eyes refused to stay open, then put on her pyjamas and went to sleep.

She woke briefly to the odour of cooking oil and cigarette smoke, and the touch of a kiss on her forehead.

On Saturdays, Alma was quiet because her mother slept in, behind her closed bedroom door until noon. This morning Alma slid back the bolt and opened the milk box beside the outside door, removing the bottle of milk and loaf of bread left there during the morning's delivery. She counted the change in the envelope her mother placed in the box each night with enough money for the milk and bread. She put the milk in the icebox, pulled on her jacket, checked to be sure she had her key, grabbed four cookies from the jar on the counter and slipped out the back door.

It was a sunny morning and the air was crisp and clean. From the street in front of the Liffey came the *cloppity-clop* of Gertrude, the ice man's horse, hauling the wagon that squeaked under a ponderous load of ice blocks buried in sawdust. Alma walked over to Little Wharf Road and turned toward the harbour. The old buildings on either side were made of wood, with shiplap siding, built one against the other so that there was one long front with many doors and small porches. The owners had painted them in different colours so they looked like boxes lined up in a row from the harbour to the square.

As she walked past the Customs House under the tall maple trees, a movement in the window of the house next door caught her eye. She stopped. The Stewart house had been uninhabited for half a year. It was one of the oldest buildings in Charlotte's Bight, and Robbie Thornton, who was in Alma's class, claimed it was haunted. Robbie was silly. Ghosts weren't real. A shadow slowly passed the window again, a figure in dark clothing. Alma ducked behind the tree, held her breath and, craning her neck till it hurt, took a peek, alert for the slightest movement. Who was creeping around in the Stewart house? Alma crouched in her hiding place for some time, but saw nothing further.

She sauntered to the harbour and strolled through the little park beside the empty marina. Little Wharf had been the original harbour of Charlotte's Bight but in modern times had been eclipsed by the main commercial harbour to the west, where the Reedbank River met the ocean. Little Wharf had become a marina and tourist attraction with its small fleet of fishing boats, its seafood restaurants and shops and snack bars, all of them closed for the season.

When Alma was little, her mother had told her that her father had "gone away for a long time." Alma had imagined that her dad had sailed off on one of the tall ships she had seen tied to the wharf the summer before last. She pictured him standing at the rail, a pipe clamped between his teeth, waving to her. The gull-white sails grew smaller and disappeared into the curved fold where the sea met the sky. Since then, even though she now knew her dad had fallen from a potato harvester and broken his neck when she was less than a year old, the harbour with its marina, park and wharf was her favourite place, and whenever her feet took her there, the first thing she did was scan the horizon, searching for sails.

Alma's mother had tried to keep the farm going. Making ends meet had never been easy, but with Alma's dad gone, it was impossible. The family had sunk deeper and deeper into debt until finally Clara had to give in and sell out to the Farmrite Corporation. By the time back taxes and debts were paid, there was little left. Alma and her mother moved to town where Clara barely supported them with part-time work.

“You’ll not find a speck of red dirt under *my* fingernails ever again,” Clara had vowed. “Never take up with a farmer or a fisherman,” she told Alma on another occasion. “There’s nothing but hardship living off the sea or the land. And there’s too much danger.”

The jetties projected from the shore in orderly rows, then each branched on either side to make more space for pleasure boats. Some sailors had screwed nameplates on the planks where they docked. In summer, the harbour swirled with life, sailboats coming and going, tourists strolling along the shore eating ice cream cones and snapping photos, buskers playing the fiddle and tapping their toes.

Today, the empty jetties and abandoned moorings gave the waterfront a forlorn air, and the water, captive between the breakwall and the shore, unable to form proper waves, sloshed randomly against the pilings. At this time of year the Springwater River’s estuary was dotted with thousands of Canada geese, grazing the bottom at low tide. When the tide turned, the geese rose in great honking clouds, beating toward the harvested grain fields across the river.

Alma had read that Canada geese mated for life. Like my mom did, she thought.

Alma walked back up Little Wharf Road on the side opposite the Customs House, sneaking glances toward the dwelling where she had seen the mysterious shape. There were curtains over the window.

“Someone has taken the Stewart house,” Alma told her mother when she sat down to her dinner. A toasted egg sandwich lay on her plate, with ketchup oozing out the sides, just the way she liked it. “They’ve put up new curtains.”

“Have they? That’s nice,” Clara replied, sipping her tea and turning a page of yesterday’s newspaper. Her hair, still damp from her bath, fell to the shoulders of her faded dressing gown. “It’s a shame to see a house sit empty. Are you coming shopping with me today?”

“Sure.”

Alma was half hoping her mother had forgotten about the telephone call from Miss McAllister, and at the same time anxious to find out what it was about, to get it over with, to end the suspense. She wondered if she should bring it up.

“Tomorrow’s Sunday. What would you like to do?” her mother asked idly.

“Let’s go to the show.”

“We’ll see what my purse looks like after we do the shopping this afternoon.”

“Then the Turnaround.”

“Listen, girl, I’ve got to put money aside for your winter coat and boots. You’re growing like a weed. We can’t be throwing money away on books right now.”

Alma lowered her head. Her mother constantly worried about money, and her worrying put a hard edge on her words sometimes.

“And now we should talk about Miss McAllister’s phone call.”

Alma put down her glass. Suddenly her sandwich was a hard lump in her stomach.

“Your class had a visitor last Thursday.”

“Yes. She walked up and down the rows, talking to the teacher.”

“Well, it’s good news. Her name is Olivia Chenoweth.”

“That’s a funny name.”

“Funny or not, she wants to hire you.”

“Me?”

“You. Miss McAllister, as usual, wasn’t very clear what kind of work it is. Probably housekeeping. She lives with her mother, Olivia Chenoweth does. They’re new in town. From away. I’ve got her phone number.”

Alma had never had a job. It might be nice to earn some money, she thought. Suddenly she felt more grown-up.

“So what do you think?” Clara asked, getting up and adding hot water to the teapot. “We could use the extra money. But first, let’s find out what’s astir.”

“All right, Mom.”

Clara went through the inner door to use the phone in the Liffey. She came back after a few minutes.

“Small world,” she said as she shut the door. “Olivia Chenoweth is expecting you at three o’clock. She and her mother are the people who have taken the Stewart house.”

Across the road from the Stewart house, Alma stood under the maple tree where she had crouched that same morning. It was the only dwelling in the row with an upstairs dormer. The green paint on the window trim and shutters was flaking away and the porch railing had been broken off and tossed onto the lawn.

Alma crossed the road, trod up the creaky wooden steps and pulled open the storm door. The hinge squeaked. Robbie Thornton would love that, she thought as she lifted the wrought-iron lion's-head knocker and let it thump against the door.

Plump was the polite word to describe Olivia Chenoweth. She was wearing a grey cardigan over a green paisley dress, with a string of glass beads around her neck. Close up, she looked older than when she had visited Alma's class. There were grey strands in her hair and crow's feet in the corners of her eyes.

"Come in, dear," Olivia Chenoweth said, "and give me your jacket."

She preceded Alma down a short hall piled with cartons that read "Atlantic Moving" and into a sitting room jammed to the walls with furniture—stuffed chairs on either side of a huge radio set, a long couch, end tables with doilies that drooped over the sides, a thick rug with burn marks near the hearth. The only new things in the room seemed to be the curtains.

"Take a seat, dear," the woman said. "Would you like something to drink? Tea? Or juice? I'm afraid we don't have soda."

"No, thank you," Alma replied, sitting down in an upholstered chair by the window.

"Well, then." Olivia Chenoweth perched on the edge of the couch opposite Alma, as if she expected to jump up at any minute. "I suppose I should let you know what your duties are—if you decide to accept, that is."

Alma was pleased that she hadn't said, "If your mother decides." The decision was Alma's. "By the way, you may call me Miss Olivia. I am companion and secretary to my mother, who is the person you'll be working for, strictly speaking, although your contact will be almost entirely with me."

She paused, as if to allow Alma time to absorb the information. Miss Olivia spoke like an educated woman, forming her words carefully, and she had an accent from away.

"My mother carries on a significant degree of correspondence with persons from, well, all over the world, not to put too fine a point on it. She insists that her letters conform to a certain format. I visited your school the other day to look for someone with the required skills at penmanship. I chose you."

"Thank you," Alma said, wishing Louise Arsenault was in the room.

"You see, Alma," Miss Olivia went on, "my mother requires that all her letters be handwritten. She considers any other means of producing epistles to be impersonal and unprofessional. You might say she is a little old-fashioned in that regard. However, she is unable to write with the elegance she once possessed—her handwriting is somewhat shaky, you see—and I am far too busy to take up the task myself, even if my hand *were* up to my Mother's standard. This is where you come in. If you could help, I—and my mother, of course—would be most grateful."

Alma took a breath. "I'm not sure what you want me to do," she admitted.

"Well, dear, my mother dictates her letters to me, and you will simply copy them and address the envelopes. She will of course add her signature. It's as simple as that."

"Oh," Alma said, letting her breath out again. That sounds easy, she thought.

"So, may we count on you?"

Alma thought about her mother's constant fear of running out of money. Now, she could help. "Yes," she said.

"Excellent. I suggest you come here after school on Tuesdays and on Saturday mornings. Would that be all right?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now come with me and meet my mother."

Miss Olivia led Alma from the sitting room down a hallway. They passed a kitchen on the right, which was, Alma noticed, much bigger than the one in her apartment, with gleaming countertops and a four-burner stove, and a black-and-white-tiled floor with no wooden planks showing. Miss Olivia stopped before a wooden door and knocked.

"Come," Alma heard faintly.

Miss Olivia opened the door and took Alma into a spacious room. At one end, a grey-haired woman was sitting in a leather wingback chair, a thick shawl around her narrow shoulders despite the flames that leapt cheerily in the brick fireplace. Her black dress was buttoned tightly at her throat and wrists. On one side of her was a brass floor lamp with a fringed ivory-coloured shade; on the other, a stand topped with a large glass ashtray, an ornate lighter and a black lacquer box, opened to reveal a neat row of cigarettes. An ivory cigarette holder rested like an oar on the edge of the ashtray.

Despite the light from the window and the crackling fire, the room seemed gloomy and dim. The wainscoting was dark wood, the wallpaper above it maroon with thin gold lines rising to the ceiling. A thick rug with a navy blue background covered most of the wooden floor. There were two large oaken desks set before a wall of empty shelves, with more boxes waiting to be unpacked. The air was heavy with the stale odour of cigarette smoke.

"Mother, this is Alma," Miss Olivia announced. "Alma, this is my mother. You may address her as Miss Lily."

Alma hung back, tempted to slip behind Miss Olivia, out of sight of the black eyes that fixed her fiercely, like darts. The old woman's hawkish nose dominated a long face creased from eye to chin with deep furrows. Her thin lips turned downwards in a scowl.

"Come closer, girl," she commanded in a voice surprisingly deep and strong.

Alma did as she was told, reluctantly stepping toward the imposing woman, her hands clasped tightly behind her back.

"Your name is Alma, is it?" the woman asked, leaning forward and overlapping her hands on the top of a walking stick of twisted black wood.

Alma tried not to stare at the hands. The fingers were long and skinny and pale, but the knuckles were swollen and flushed, like knobs, as if Miss Lily had been out in the cold without her gloves on. They looked sore. No wonder her handwriting was "shaky," as Miss Olivia had said.

"Yes, Miss Lily," she said, swallowing hard.

Miss Lily's mouth became a horizontal line, and her lips drew back slightly to reveal

greyish teeth. She stared into Alma's face, as if memorizing it. "Well, that's a good sign. good sign. Do you know what 'Alma' signifies?"

"Um, not really."

"What does 'not really' mean?" the old woman demanded, her thick eyebrows slanting toward the bridge of her nose. "Do you know or don't you?"

"I d-don't," Alma stuttered.

The almost-smile, like a fox baring its teeth, returned to Miss Lily's stern features. "Alma means, in Latin, one who nurtures, and in Arabic, learned."

Alma swallowed again. What was expected of her? "Oh," she said.

"Let us hope you can live up to such a promising appellation," Miss Lily said. "Now, my daughter tells me that you have an excellent hand and you are prepared to work for me."

"Yes, Miss Lily," Alma said, not at all sure what an excellent hand was, but certain she would rather not set foot in this room—or this house—again.

"Well, then, we shall try you out, and if you prove satisfactory, you may consider yourself engaged."

The wingback creaked as the old woman sat back, holding the walking stick across her knees as if ready to strike someone with it.

"Thank you, Miss Lily," Alma murmured as she felt Miss Olivia's hands on her shoulders, turning her and guiding her out of the room.

Miss Olivia shut the door behind them, and took Alma back to the sitting room.

"Now, Alma, I shall explain your duties," she said. "Sit down here, dear."

Miss Olivia drew the chair away from a mahogany writing desk that seemed to totter on its slender, curved legs. A row of pigeonholes held envelopes and writing paper. On the surface were a green blotter with leather corners, a brass lamp with a pull-chain and a crystal writing stand with two pen-holders, an inkwell with a brass lid and a depression in which paper clips lay beside gleaming brass-coloured pointed objects Alma didn't recognize.

"Now, Alma," Miss Olivia began, pulling a chair to the desk beside Alma. "This will be your workplace. As you see, your materials are all present: the writing paper"—she took from one of the pigeonholes a sheet of thick, creamy paper with a watermark that depicted a seahorse—"the envelopes"—Miss Olivia pointed to another pigeonhole—"and your pen and ink. When you arrive to work, you'll find a folder here on the desk. In it will be letters dictated to me by my mother. I take down her words in shorthand, then type them out for you. You simply copy the letter in longhand, address the envelope and clip them together with a paper clip. Then place them in the second folder. All right?"

"Yes," said Alma. No, she didn't say. She planned not to come here again, to this dreary, overheated house, this strange woman and the even stranger old woman sitting like an ogre in the back room.

"Now, there is only one thing you might find challenging at first," Miss Olivia went on. "and that is the pen my mother requires you to use." She removed one of the pens from its holder. Alma saw right away that it was unusual. It had no point, for one thing. It was longer than a pencil and made of wood—black, Alma reflected, like almost everything else in the house. One end was barrel-shaped; the other tapered to a sharp point like a rat's tail.

Miss Olivia took one of the brass objects from the trough in the crystal writing stand and fitted it into the circular slit in the barrel end of the pen. The brass things, she explained,

were pen nibs. She flipped open the hinged lid of the inkwell and dipped the nib into the ebony ink. She slid the nib over the edge of the inkwell to remove excess ink.

“Would you like to try it?” she asked, handing the pen to Alma.

Alma took the pen in her hand and positioned the writing paper on the blotter at the proper angle, just as Miss McAllister had taught her. The paper’s texture was heavy and smooth.

“What should I write?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Miss Olivia replied, getting up from her chair.

Alma wrote her name. Then her mother’s name, “Clara.” Then her favourite colour, “yellow,” and her most precious place, “the old harbour.” As her hand moved, she watched the jet-coloured ink flow smoothly from the bright nib to the glossy surface of the paper. When the pen ran dry, in the middle of “fireweed,” Alma’s choice of wildflower—even though it wasn’t, strictly speaking, according to Miss McAllister, a flower—Alma dipped the nib in the inkwell and rubbed it against the glass wall of the well just as Miss Olivia had done. She completed “fireweed” and put the pen into the holder.

“Clear the nib before you put it away,” Miss Olivia said from the couch, where she had been sitting and watching Alma. “There are tissues in the drawer.”

Alma pulled open the wide desk drawer, where she found a flat box of tissues among more stacks of writing paper and envelopes. She cleaned the nib and placed the pen in the holder. Then she pushed back her chair and stood up.

“Well, then,” Miss Olivia said. “We’ll see you again next Saturday morning.”

Oh, no, you won’t, Alma didn’t say.

Alma dawdled on her way home, and by the time she reached the alley behind the Liffey Pub it had begun to rain. She ran the last of the way and used her key to open the door.

She found her mother in her bedroom, sitting before a makeshift dressing table—a board resting on two upended wooden boxes, with a mirror above. She was brushing her hair, humming to herself. Alma sat on the edge of the bed and watched.

Clara wore no makeup, just lipstick. Her chestnut hair was thick and lustrous, and she was proud of it. She kept it long—to her shoulder blades—but wore it up under an ugly white net when she was working in the Liffey. It was a rule.

“How did your interview go?” Clara asked.

“I don’t like them.”

“Tell me.”

“Olivia Chenoweth smells like dried flowers and she has crooked teeth. And her mother, who I’m supposed to call Miss Lily, is right scowly. She reminds me of Miss Havisham.”

“Who?”

“Miss Havisham, in *Great Expectations*. She’s skinny and ugly and she looks like she just got up out of a coffin.”

Clara laughed and put down her brush. “Alma, that’s not nice. What’s the job?”

“Copying out letters with an old-fashioned pen.”

“No more than that?”

“I have to do the envelopes, too. But I don’t want to go back.”

“Well, Alma, I don’t want to go upstairs to that hot kitchen, either. But we need the

money. So I want you to take the job. Try it out for a few weeks, at least.”

“Then can I quit?”

Clara tucked her hair under the net. “We’ll see,” she said.

On Saturday morning, Alma ate a breakfast of tea with toast and blueberry jam, brushed her teeth, put on her coat and slipped quietly out the back door, locking it behind her.

It was a sunny day and the air was chilly, carrying the heavy scent of seaweed, sand and salt, the sharp tang of autumn leaves. Alma walked quickly down Little Wharf Road. She didn't want to be late on the first official day of her first official job. Because it faced west the front of the Chenoweth house, as Alma now thought of it, was in shadow. Since her first visit, the porch railing had been repaired and painted. The dormer stared down on the street like a Cyclops eye. Alma thought of Hansel and Gretel finding the witch's house in the forest. She crossed the street and lifted the knocker.

Miss Olivia bade Alma good morning and let her in. Alma returned her greeting, noticing that, under the flower fragrance that seemed to envelope Miss Olivia like a cloud, was the faint whiff of perspiration.

The cardboard cartons had been cleared away from the hallway. The odour of fried bacon and coffee hung in the air, and Alma could see the breakfast dishes on the kitchen table. Miss Olivia showed Alma into the sitting room. Just as she had promised, there was a folder on the desk to the left of the green blotter and another folder to the right.

"Everything is ready, Alma," Miss Olivia said. "Call out if you need me. I'll just be in the kitchen."

"Yes, Miss Olivia."

Alma seated herself and opened the left file folder. Briefly, she savoured a wicked thought: if she made a poor job of copying this morning, Miss Lily might fire her, and Alma would not have to return to this spooky house anymore. The folder contained three sheets of paper, each with typing on it. She took a leaf of the creamy writing paper from the pigeonhole and placed it on top of a lined page, picked up the pen, lifted the brass lid of the inkwell, dipped the pen nib into the black liquid and began to copy.

Dear Mr. O'Hare,

Allow me to express my gratitude for your assistance in putting my affairs in order prior to our removal to Charlotte's Bight. Though the circumstances leading to our decision were not at all happy, my daughter and I are resigned....

When she had finished the body of the letter, Alma wrote "Sincerely," followed by a comma, and left space for Miss Lily's name. She took an envelope from the pigeonhole and wrote out the address, a law firm in Rockport, Massachusetts. Then she put down the pen. She got up from the desk and stepped into the hall.

"Miss Olivia," she called out.

Olivia Chenoweth looked up from the kitchen table, which she was wiping down with a large rag.

"Um," Alma began.

"Yes, dear?"

"You didn't tell me the return address," Alma said. "To put on the envelope."

"You needn't include it," she said, rather abruptly.

“Oh,” Alma replied, frowning. That’s strange, she thought. At school we learned always to include the return address. It’s a rule.

She went back to the desk. The second letter was to someone named Madeleine.

We have arrived and are set up in our new home, a modest but snug little spot by the harbour. Thank you again for your help. Should you wish to write to Olivia or me, you may send your letters to the usual address.

The third was also short. It was addressed to a library in a place called Cambridge.

Dear Mrs. Gatwick,

Thank you for your invitation to visit your library and speak with your patrons. I fear I must decline, however, because I have recently moved.

There were two more letters. It was past ten when Alma slipped the last sheet into the folder to the right. She carefully cleaned the brass nib and placed the pen in its holder. Pushing back her chair, she got up just as Miss Olivia entered the room.

“Quite finished, Alma?”

“Yes, Miss Olivia.”

“Excellent. Then you’ll be on your way. See you next time.”

When Alma got home, it was almost noon, and her mother was sitting at the kitchen table in slippers and bathrobe, a cup of tea before her and an open book propped against the teapot.

On the floor by the icebox was a large cloth bag. The week’s laundry. Later, they would haul it to the old house by the park on Springbank Road, where Mrs. Squires took in laundry from the Liffey Pub and several restaurants. She kept three electric washing machines in her cellar, and on Saturday afternoons she rented one of them to Clara for a couple of hours.

Clara would grocery shop while Alma sat under the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling reading, accompanied by the *slosh-slosh* of the washer. When the wind-up timer on the sheet gave off its piercing ring, she would run the clothes through the wringer, cranking the handle with both hands as the clothes slipped into the rinse tub.

Clara put down her book. “There’s a drop of tea left.”

“No, thanks, Mom.”

“Well, sit down anyway and tell me all about this new family in the Stewart house.”

“It’s the Chenoweth house now,” Alma said with authority.

“Is it, indeed, then? So what about the occupants of the Chenoweth house?”

Her mother loved gossip. Whatever she picked up from Alma would be passed on over drinks and dinner orders and tubs of dirty dishes in the kitchen of the Liffey Pub. Dutifully, Alma told all she knew.

“So you didn’t see the old one today? The Miss Havisham woman?”

“Miss Lily. No. And Olivia Chenoweth smells. And she has a space between her two front teeth.”

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