

Anna Solomon

Lotto

THOSE days and months I spent with Alma, I was new to Providence. I'd left New York after Ben left me, and I was living in a valley inside, pale and uncluttered and mute. I knew no one. I spent my days wandering the Portuguese neighborhood where I lived, avoiding the storefronts crammed with sweetbreads, the corner grocer with his nuts and fruits. I survived on saltines and peanut butter. I walked on across bridges, past schools that looked like industrial wastelands, along brick-cobbled streets where professors strolled with antisocial dogs. I was working nights at a call center answering calls from people who'd maxed out their credit cards.

I found Alma on a flier in a coffee shop, where I was staring at ads for roommates and futons and Cuisinarts. I didn't need these things, but it was a great relief to see other people's lives coming apart. I wondered who they were, what sorts of hopes they allowed themselves, whether they'd created their own pandects of self-denial. One flier stood out: EXTRA HOURS? VOLUNTEER TO SPEND TIME WITH AN ELDER. I had hours, and I had a lonely guilt—or guilt at my self-pity for being lonely—so I went for an interview and left with Alma's address on an index card that read *African-American, 98 years old. Department of Social Services visits daily to medicate for Crohn's disease.*

Her social worker was Prairie, a dyed blond who wore push-up bras and a wide smear of fuchsia lipstick outside the line of her lips. The first day I came, Prairie was on the verge of tears trying to get Alma to take a plateful of pills. Alma shook her head, the skinny shreds of her braids whipping, her mouth clamped shut, her left leg hooked over the ragged arm of her chair.

Prairie shouted, "She won't be reasonable about anything!"

The place was overheated and smelled sour. I stood in the doorway, still in my coat, thinking I might slip back into the hall. Then I saw Alma's eyes. Despite their zombie-ish swing, they were certain and clear, the whites as bright as hard-boiled eggs.

Prairie rattled open the refrigerator and shoved a jar of applesauce at Alma. "This," she said, "is the only way she'll take them."

"Not today I won't."

Prairie turned to me. "Leslie?"

"Leah," I said.

"Lee. This woman is a pain in the ass. You get in the elevator, she pushes the button for every floor down. You bring her flowers, she tapes them to the wall. She won't go to the doctor unless you bring her chocolate, and she's not supposed to eat chocolate."

I looked at Alma's bare walls. I imagined her standing, one foot on each arm of her chair, reaching for the wall with a rose.

"I can understand that," I said.

"I bring cards? She plays solitaire."

I said, "My favorite. Especially in poor company."

Alma looked at me then. Her mouth twitched.

I committed myself to getting rid of Prairie. I made sure to be there every time she showed up. I moved her purse when she wasn't looking, and to further confuse Prairie I convinced Alma to take her medicine greedily to show how she'd reformed. "Oh thank you, Lotto." This is what Alma called me; she said it made her think of luck. "Please could I have more water, Lotto?" Alma made me out to be the savior, and all the effort felt worthy, almost revolutionary, as if together we were disturbing some larger order. I brought boxes of saltines and stayed all day.

When we were alone, I let Alma do what she wanted. I bought her coffee, though she wasn't supposed to drink it. I turned up Nina Simone louder than the vacuum. I watched her play a game with her pills in which she lifted each one grandly toward her mouth until, at the last instant, with a flourish of her arm, she stuffed it under the cushion of her chair.

One afternoon, as I was leaving, she said, "Pick me up some dirty magazines."

“Are you serious?” The only reading material I’d ever seen in Alma’s apartment was a pamphlet next to the toilet titled *This Book of Divine HELP*. I’d assumed it belonged to Prairie.

Alma leaned forward. “I like girls.” She raised her eyebrows, mocking my surprise. “You ’spect old people not to be as many ways as everybody else?”

“Of course not.”

“Liar. Then don’t ask me if I’m serious.”

Alma had a way of making me feel my cowardice all raised up like hives. It stung, but like peroxide, as though it would make me cleaner, better.

“Do you want anything special, then?” I asked. “Girls who like girls? Butch? Asian? There’s something for everybody.”

Alma squinted. I couldn’t tell if she mistrusted these magazines or the fact that I knew what I was talking about.

“My boyfriend and I used to look at all of it,” I said. Though, actually, I was talking about a few run-of-the-mill *Hustlers*, and I’d been alone when I discovered them stuffed into the back of our file cabinet. I’d been disturbed, flipping through, to find myself turned on. I’d felt smashed up all over again, as if he would still be there next to me if he’d known I was the sort of woman he didn’t have to hide porn from. Or that I could have been. This line of reasoning was ridiculous, of course. Ben had not run off in search of sex. He’d run off to an orthodox yeshiva in Israel.

Alma said, “I don’t care what girls or what types of people it’s done for.”

Her neighborhood was a dead zone, all tenements and parking lots. When the sky was gray, which seemed like most of the time, it felt apocalyptic. I had to buy the magazines across town, at the mini-mart near work. I felt no desire looking at them now. I’d tried masturbating once since Ben left, but it felt desperate and false, and I didn’t make it anywhere. And there was Alma, at ninety-eight, still wanting to get it on. I pictured her leaning back in her chair—was it the same at that age, the same fickle, predatory process?

I settled on *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and one called *Busty Beauties*. On my way to the register, I spied a co-worker—or rather, I spied the frosted bangs I spent my nights watching over a putty-colored divide. I started to shove the magazines under my shirt, then realized I didn’t care enough to bother. I didn’t know her name, and there was no one for her to tell. The call center was a solitary place. We were almost all women, just vessels for voices; the only closeness I felt to anyone was based on what I heard in the bathroom: some talked on cellphones as they peed, others vomited without shame, some

sniffled and coughed. One, who wore only socks, punched the stall doors. It was a stricken scene but alive, and sometimes it got me close to crying. You could feel men crawling all over the walls, like roots and fires under all that pain. Ben was there, too, just before he left, when his arms seemed harder, as if dowels had been planted in them.