

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

*Mara Fein*

### **Dreaming**

ALMA COULDN'T SLEEP. Earlier that day, a letter marked urgent had arrived from Dyersville, Iowa. As she opened it a photo of a sad dark-eyed young girl floated to the floor. Cousins she barely knew had died. Lawyers explained that the parents' will left their farm to Alma on the condition that she cared for their now twelve-year old daughter, Leora, who was currently staying with neighbors. Leora had no other relatives and they wanted family to raise her.

Raise a child at her age? An unmarried woman? Ridiculous. A career woman in her fifties had no time to raise a child. Besides, her students were her children. She must write back that this could not be.

Alma always told people she sang at the Met. Truthfully, she sang in the chorus a few times, but let others think what they might. Between that and weddings, she earned enough to pay for her apartment. Giving voice lessons to young children brought in the rest. But she was not rich and some days she wondered how she managed.

She lived on the edge of New York City's Lower East Side, near the hospital, and so she mostly dated doctors, divorced or widowed. They were attracted to Alma the opera singer, Alma the optimist. Why not look for the good in people, she would smile when they complained about their patients, their former wives.

These men didn't want marriage, just a fling with their diva of choice. Well, at her age, the best were already taken anyway. And she had always enjoyed her freedom, her solitude, she told herself. So she flattered them, flirted, and enjoyed the brief relationships, the expensive restaurants, the gifts.

But yesterday Dr. Max Schulman had proposed. A pediatrician. A bit overweight, but a nice man and, although she had never wanted to marry before, she realized now that she did not want to be alone for the rest of her life. Her mother was right. A single woman, a woman alone, Alma, she always said, has a past, but no future.

Alma knew she did not love him. But his proposal made her think differently about the child, Leora, with no family but her. Perhaps she was wrong to reject the child. Reject. Such a harsh word. She who always embraced life. Perhaps ...

Alma sat at her window all that night and into the morning. Watched the people passing by. The young people rushing to wherever young people go late at night. The middle aged people stepping in and out of cabs. The occasional old lady trudging home alone with her little shopping cart. Alma did not want to be that old lady.

And so Alma decided she would create a family for the child who had no one else. And for herself ... who had no one else. And for Dr. Max. What could be better?

The next day Alma told Max about the child. Showed him her picture. He took the photo in his hand, inclined his head, then held it out

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to her and patted her hand. He took her hand and smiled. She said yes, I will marry you. Max took her home, left her with a kiss and a bow. She watched him from her third floor window as he hailed a cab and rode off into the night, her Prince Charming.

The next day Max called. Alma, he said, I love you, truly I do, but I have found that sometimes you must choose between the things you love and the things you can be. I cannot be a father again, Alma. I'm too old.

There was a long silence. Alma, he said. Alma, are you there?

How do you explain you want a family, not a lover, Alma thought, but did not say, as she softly hung up the phone.

The next day she wrote the lawyer, told him that he should sell the farm in Iowa and with the money she would raise the child here in New York City. Her first live-in student, she laughed to herself.

One week later, Alma held up the photo as she stood in Grand Central Station waiting for Leora's train. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Limited pulled into the station at 8 a.m, right on time. A few minutes later Alma saw the young girl step down from the train carrying a single small suitcase. Plainly dressed and slight, the girl hesitated, looked about her, and then saw Alma waving. The girl did not smile, but lowered her eyes. Alma went over to her. We met when you were much younger. Do you remember? The girl shook her head, staring at this large woman in a fur coat. Of course you don't. You were so young. But we will become good friends, she said as she held her hand out. Leora hesitated, then nervously grasped it.

As they exited the train station hand in hand, Alma quickly hailed a cab and they slipped in out of the cold. Once inside, Leora turned and looked out the back window. Alma stretched her arm around the girl and pulled her close. Always look forward, said Alma with a smile. That's where happiness lies.

The next morning, after breakfast, Alma said, Leora, my mother always told me when you are blue, you should buy yourself a present. And that is what we are going to do. Buy you a present. So off they went to 34<sup>th</sup> Street, to Macy's.

Leora's eyes opened wide before the huge shop windows where snow fell onto scenes of children sledding and skating. Inside the store, she stared at the smartly dressed matrons in their hats and fur coats as they passed by, her mouth open with wonder.

Try this on, said Alma, a bright yellow cardigan in her hands. Yes, she nodded with approval, we will buy this for you. To keep those blue thoughts at bay, she smiled.

Oh thank you, Leora cried out as she hugged Alma. And, for the very first time since her arrival, she smiled.

The following day, Leora watched Alma give a voice lesson in the apartment. Sitting quietly beside Alma as she played the piano, she became her page-turner. Alma did not ask, the child simply sensed when to do so. Later, just before dinner, she heard the child singing softly to

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herself, singing the simple song her student had sung. Do you sing? she asked the child. Leora looked down and reddened. Come, Alma said as she sat at the piano. Sing for me. She pulled out the music from earlier.

Leora shook her head, her eyes gazing down at the floor. Come, Alma smiled. It is only you and me. And we should get to know what we like about each other. Yes?

And so Leora sang. So sweetly, with a more beautiful voice than Alma ever had. When Leora finished, Alma put her arms around her, held her close. So, she whispered, we have a little diva. Leora stretched her little arms around Alma. Well, around most of Alma.

Leora told Alma that every Saturday afternoon she and her parents sat beside the radio in the living room, listened to the Metropolitan Opera broadcast. In the winter her mother would make hot chocolate for her. Afterwards they would discuss the story. Sometimes her mother would play some of the music on the little upright piano they owned and Leora would sing. But mama's favorite song wasn't opera, said Leora. It was Schumann's *Traumerei*. It means dreaming, she smiled proudly. Mama said when she played it on our piano she thought of all the dreams she had for me.

Alma took Leora's hand and they walked over to the window. The lights of the city shimmered. Like musical notes dancing across the night. Leora stared out at them in her innocence. Thank you for taking me in, Leora softly said. She looked up at Alma. Do you know that your name means "shining light?" Alma said.

Alma pulled Leora closer. She felt the girl's gaze. She smiled back, held the girl closer. There would be much work, Alma decided. They would have to sacrifice. But, she thought, what is life without sacrifice? And the result would be that Leora would sing in places she had never sung in, could never sing in. Flowers would be strewn at her feet. She would be worshipped.

Alma shivered, realized how cold it was standing by the wintry window. Come, she said, giving Leora a big hug. It is time for bed for both of us. We have had quite a day.

The next morning, Leora came down with a fever. So Alma called Dr. Max. Nothing to worry about, smiled Dr. Max after he examined Leora. She will be fine.

When Alma looked at him with a worried expression, he said aren't you the one who sees the good in everything, taking her hand in his. See the good here, this will make her stronger, he smiled. After he left, Alma thought: yes, Leora will be better tomorrow, or, if she isn't better tomorrow, she will be better the next day.

Alma sat beside Leora and sang softly. She made chicken soup and helped the child raise the spoon to her mouth. Watched her sleep. This is what being a mother is like, she thought. Worrying. And ... she smiled to herself ... dreaming. One day, Leora and I will sit together and remember this day. Remember the silly woman worrying ... a woman who never worried ... who always saw the best in life.

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But Leora died two days later. Just twelve years old, sometime during the night, she simply stopped breathing.

As they wheeled out the little body, Alma, despondent, simply sat staring at her feet. An hour passed. Then, slowly, she rose. Walked over to the piano and simply stood there, silent, looking at the little yellow sweater left behind on the piano bench. Her hands slowly rubbed the wool, caressed it to her face. Then, as she sank down to the bench, her hands began to play Schumann's *Traumerei* ... *Dreaming*. After a few measures, she stopped, stared blankly at the piano. Her head sank down to her chest and she softly wept. Who was this God that took this child from her? What kind of world was this where the young are taken before they have a chance to live?

Alma buried Leora the next day, a cold, snowy day. The rabbi stumbled as he approached the open grave. After a short silence, he began to speak, sighed, stuttered, sighed again. Shaking his head he stumbled through the prayers. Alma stood alone, her head bowed, her soul weary.

You may place soil on the coffin, if you wish, the rabbi softly said. He gently placed his hand upon her shoulder. It does help us to accept death, he whispered.

Alma slowly nodded, knelt, grasped a tiny handful of dirt, and sprinkled it on the little coffin, on what would never be, then simply stood, turned away, and trudged off. Her footprints disappeared behind her in the softly falling snow. As if she never was.

Alma went home to her very empty apartment, sat at the piano, and stared at Leora's photo. Try as she might, she could no longer hear Leora's voice. She was completely gone, so thoroughly lost that she might never have been.

The next day Alma found she could not sing.

In old cultures, when someone is ill they say we have lost our song. Alma had lost them all.