

The Antithesis of Suffering

Maria Arena

Boxes fill the house where Alma has lived for thirty years. They crowd the rooms and balance atop each other along the hallway like audacious acrobats. Inside the boxes are transitory things that, nonetheless, reflect Alma's personal style, which is something she has in abundance.

At least, I've always thought so, and others have agreed.

I remember a boy, a first-year linguistics student, who'd been infatuated with Alma during our final year of university. He cornered us in the cafeteria and was banging on and on about Saussure and Eco, trying to impress her. I rolled my eyes when he glanced away, distracted by a short skirt, but Alma was too kind to shut him down. Eventually, time saved her, and she begged off to go to her next lecture. As she walked away, the boy—flustered and glassy-eyed with hope—had murmured, 'She has such, such... *je ne sais quoi*.' I almost laughed at him, but being friends with Alma had taught me better, so I settled for a sympathetic pat of his shoulder.

It's strange to be thinking of those days as I wander through the narrow aisles made by Alma's boxes; lanes of memory, trailing through the lounge room, the kitchen, and her study. I brush my fingertips over the boxes as I pass them. Each one has a label on top with a

name and an address written in Alma's considered script. Tomorrow, they will be shipped to their new homes.

The idea makes me sad, but Alma is practical about such affairs.

'We've lived long enough to understand the impermanence of things,' she'd said when I explained my feelings to her a week ago. She was preparing the last meal she would cook in her kitchen, and it was a pleasure to see her at work; gently rolling gnocchi dough between her palms, a comma of flour on her cheek.

'Not everything passes,' I replied, dashing salt into the water bubbling on the stove. Her practiced detachment had stirred an eddy of petulance in me.

Alma dusted off her hands before taking mine. She held my gaze and waited until I found my way back to acceptance. After a few moments, I nodded.

She smiled. 'What were we talking about?'

I hesitated before catching the mischievous gleam in her eyes. 'Oh, you—' She released my hands and pranced away, laughing, as I chased her around the bench in the centre of her kitchen, armed with a tea towel and my love for her.

The echo of our laughter fades as I stop my roaming in her bedroom.

There are four indents in the carpet where her wrought-iron bed had sat since the night we'd put it together, listening to Joss Stone while sharing a bottle of merlot and the various tools we'd borrowed from her new neighbours. She'd brought the bed from an antique shop in Windsor and had called me at work, breathless with excitement. 'Angie. It's perfect. I can't wait to try it out!'

'Really?'

She was silent for a second, and then she laughed. 'You know what I mean!'

When we reversed the process—*sans* wine since Alma had given up alcohol two years ago—I wondered aloud about the name of the antique shop. Her fingers froze mid-turn

of a screw, and her face clouded as she struggled for the memory. A surge of guilt swelled inside me.

‘Hey, no slacking off, woman,’ I said, keeping my tone playful.

Her face remained pinched with effort. ‘I can’t seem to—’

‘Don’t worry, sweetheart. It’s not important,’ I replied, getting to work on the next bolt. Soon we were focused on the task, and the moment, like so many others, was lost.

Alma’s bed is gone now, gifted to a favourite niece, and the rest of the large furniture followed suit: the oak study desk went to her daughter, the TV she never watched to her son, bookshelves to an adored niece. The fridge was the last piece to go, picked up by a distant cousin for a flat he owns in Darlington.

‘I may have done him a disservice,’ Alma had quipped while we watched him and a friend wrestle the appliance onto the back of a Bunning’s ute. ‘From what I remember, his apartment is smaller than that fridge.’ And we had laughed, painfully, at the irony of her remembering something so trivial.

The sound of running water from the ensuite interrupts my memories. A few seconds tick by, and then I feel the weight of her arms around my waist. Her head rests against my shoulder; a breath, laced with mint, brushes my skin, and I am struck by my awareness of her.

‘Are you ready?’

‘I believe so,’ Alma replies, although she doesn’t release me, so I wait, staying steady for her just as she has done for so many others over the years. But, as has been her way since she was a young girl, there is no wallowing, and she straightens, once again brisk in her movement and manner. ‘Let’s get this show on the road, Angie. We’ve a schedule to keep, right?’

I smile for her benefit and follow her between the boxes, out of her bedroom, down the hallway, to her study. If I could be truthful, I would say: *Screw the schedule, hon. Let’s*

grab a coffee, go to the movies, or take Shepherd for a walk on the beach. Except, Shep is down on the farm now, and coffee is out, as is food of any kind, and the idea of a movie is ridiculous.

Alma doesn't have two hours to spare.

A stack of boxes is pushed against the study wall, on top of which is a leather satchel containing an account of Alma's life: her passport, driver's licence, bank details, marriage certificate, divorce decree, and, of course, her will. She retrieves the satchel while I lean against the doorframe, with a hand in my pocket, cupping the keys to the house. Alma has entrusted them to me because keys are the one thing she's guaranteed to forget.

When she'd come to accept that forgetfulness wasn't just an unfortunate habit, Alma had taken to making light of the situation: 'Please find the keys to my dementia,' she'd joke as we turned her house upside down. Then, there was the evening we'd spent with friends psychoanalysing her tendency to misplace. Towards the end of the discussion, Alma had declared: 'Look, it is clearly the case that my *das Es* refuses to be caged. I am a free spirit, and I will not be locked away!' The others had chuffed laughter, but I drew away and took my wine to the back deck, where my mind filled with dark whispers of *todestrieb*, *todestrieb*, *todestrieb*. I knew in that moment that she would come to me with her decision and, after a few months of deliberation, she did.

Alma is staring at the study wall, clutching the satchel. 'Hon?' I prompt. She remains silent, and I cross the study quickly, taking her elbow as she sways. 'What is it, Alma?'

'I can't remember what was on this wall,' she says, panic in her voice.

'Oh,' I say, stepping around her, 'I can help with that.' The wall is a patchwork of faint rectangular outlines from the frames that had held her PhD and licence to practice and commendations she'd received over the years. A couple of the larger ones had held drawings

done by her patients. 'And this one was your wedding photo.' I don't insult her by asking if she remembers. 'You and Charlie were beautiful that day,' I say.

Alma strokes my arm. 'You'll always remember for me, won't you?'

I smile, fixedly. 'Always, my dear friend.'

Her smile is relaxed. 'Thank you, for everything.'

'You are most welcome,' I reply, fighting the urge to fall apart.

Alma takes my hand; she always knows what's going on inside me even when I don't have the words to explain. We stand close together in front of the empty wall, and I soak up as much of her as I can, hoping it will be enough to last me the rest of my life, knowing it won't be.

'I could go with you,' I whisper.

'But it's okay for you to stay,' she replies, as soft piano notes drift through the house: Bacchetti playing Bach—Alma's favourite.

I swallow the lump in my throat.

Alma squeezes my hand.

She lifts the satchel and gives it to me before I accompany her through her house, with the music leading us—Pied Piper-ish—to the deck. Sunlight glitters across the surface of the swimming pool and inches into the deep green shade beneath the ferns and palms that shelter Alma's yard. Her garden is in glorious bloom: grevillea, waratah, and wisteria, running riot, enticing bees to hum from blossom to blossom, while a choir of birds sing to each other across the treetops.

In the centre of the deck, under a white sail, is a rocking chair that once belonged to Alma's beloved grandmother. I have lost count of the times I've found Alma curled up on the seat, rocking slowly as she contemplates some dilemma swamping her children or one of her patients. It is her 'thinking chair', which has never failed (according to Alma) to help her find

a solution to a problem. Now, it will serve its purpose one last time—and then it will come to me.

Before she steps onto the deck, Alma pauses and surveys the scene waiting for her. ‘It’s exactly as I’ve always pictured,’ she murmurs, and I feel a wash of gratitude that my friend could have this last wish.

‘Well, except for the crowd,’ Alma continues, winking at me cheekily as she moves forward. ‘Good morning, everyone,’ she says, and slides into the rocking chair.

Hellos greet her as first Charlie and their children hug her; then, her parents shuffle over, and I hear her father say, ‘My dear girl.’

‘Ms Flowers?’

‘Yes? Umm...’ Alma says, eyeing the two women who have appeared in the doorway.

I move to Alma’s side. ‘Dr Staedler, hello,’ I say, shaking her hand.

‘Hello, Angie,’ the doctor replies with poised professionalism.

‘Oh, Dr Staedler, of course. Welcome to my home,’ Alma says, forgetting that the doctor has been to her house a dozen times over the last few months.

‘Thank you, Alma. This is my assistant and official witness, Tabitha Stirling.’ As she speaks, Tabitha passes her a silver case. ‘Are you ready to get underway?’ the doctor asks.

‘I am,’ Alma replies, locking her fingers through mine while her family settles on the divans placed within arm’s reach of the rocking chair. Tabitha brings a chair for me, and I nod gratefully as I give her the satchel and sit.

Alma watches with her usual interest while the doctor prepares the device. She doesn’t ask questions. None of us do; we’ve been over what is about to happen numerous times. In a few minutes, the doctor is done, and she retreats with Tabitha to a respectful distance.

I study Alma's face and see that the drugs are already taking affect. We have about ten minutes left with her and, without speaking, we move closer, supporting her with our presence.

Bacchetti eases into another concerto, the notes sweet and joyous. Alma gives a deep sigh and, using the heels of her bare feet, pushes the rocking chair into motion. Her gaze travels around the circle of her family and she gifts each of them with a smile before her eyes find mine.

'Okay?' she murmurs.

Anguish engulfs my heart, but I lift her hand and kiss it gently. 'Okay,' I reply.

Her eyelids flutter shut, and I rest my forehead against her hand, close my eyes, and wait for the rocking of the chair to cease.