



rob mcLennan
from MISSING PERSONS

for Kate

This entire book is a novel in the form of variations. The individual parts follow each other like individual stretches of a journey leading toward a theme, a thought, a single situation, the sense of which fades into the distance.

—Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

that place where the soul goes
to lie among buried bones

—Andrew Suknaski, *Wood Mountain Poems*

Alberta

Some people live in two places.

The first time Alberta Jonas disappeared, she slipped behind the barn and over the lump of earth they called hill and walked south through the water hemlock and dead leaves, away from the poplar and spruce, until she was out of sight of the house, and she lay down in a field. She was six years old. A mere speck in the quilt of dry prairie, where a winter as willing to crack your lips bloody, as an unbroken wind from the rocky mountains, with the help of dust or snow, willing to flay the skin from your very bones. That first time, there was no wind. There was only the air, hanging passively like plastic blue curtains melting into the ground. Heavy and sticky and useless to fight against. She walked for a while, pulling out the two tight braids she had made her mother weave in her dark hair, falling down to the shoulder. Alberta lay on the ground with the dirt in her hair and pricks of the second cut along the backs of her legs and her spine and stared up.

As big as the world was, twenty-two kilometres in any direction, the blue sky blue was infinite. It was an ocean.

She was too small to know anything about numbers, really. She knew only what she could see.

In the small house where she lived, hewn logs and echoes of sod, Alberta's mother's water had already broken. *Huffhuffhuff* of quick breathing, steady succession, bursts of light and dark. Emma. It was too late for the hospital; too late for the truck to deliver her to town. Her father was nervous, but he did not panic. Through this, as through everything, he remained steadfast. Calm. Almost mechanical. He did all the appropriate things needed to secure a child—blankets, hot water, damp cloth for

his wife's head. A soothing voice like velvet rope for her to cling to. So she would not fall.

At her age, what dangers they had entered into. In waiting too long.

Her father had been witness to childbirth before, of cousins, siblings and even for his own sweet daughter. Her father, who had wanted to wait until they were in the new country before they started to have children. Starting well past when his brother had, or any of their neighbours, well on their way to further generations.

The first time Alberta disappeared, without warning and with barely a notice.

Before her mother had begun to burst. Before what was no longer one had not yet become two. Neither caterpillar nor butterfly; a chrysalis. Disappeared behind her parents' backs and so she did not know.

Alberta had always drifted in her own circles. There were no children around for her to play with. No one close. Homestead blocks of houses. Dots she could see, but were too far to walk to. When the yellow school bus chugged down the long road to collect her, there were miles between stops. Slow turns at right angles, the direction home of north, east, north. Long turns that could be seen forever.

Lying on the cold prairie, her fingers made tracks in the cracks in the earth. Her fingers wrote speech across the scars. She listened for what the air brought to her ears. She listened for birds, and for trucks. She listened for her parents to call out her name, what would never come.

Before coming out, she had spent the morning flipping through the atlas from the bookshelf, looking at the pictures, places she knew as familiar and unfamiliar. Winnipeg, Regina, Quebec City. London. And words she could not yet read. She already knew where she was. She studied their shapes, lying on her stomach and turning pages. Her mother turned from the kitchen and snapped at her for some imagined wrong, real or otherwise, and she made off.

Lying prone in a bed of crickets, Alberta remembered that she had once heard her father mention a place called Seven Persons. She wondered if it really existed, and if it held only seven people. If anyone had to leave when a new person was born, or wandered too close to town.

She thought to herself, if she would live anywhere, she would live in One Person. She would live in the village of Her.

From the time she was small, Alberta could see forever; she could see through walls. When her dog ran away from home, she watched it for three days across the prairie. The storms as they came in, and the swirls of dust and light that created accidents on the horizon. Of buildings, hills and trees that she knew where not there. What she could see between.

A few miles to the south, the valley. Invisible, until you were in it. The two

sides that folded together like an envelope, sealing everything in. A swath in the brown earth a green scar, where a stitch of water ran. Beneath the earth. Beneath her view.

Looking back to the house, she could see her brother Paul, walking out from the house to find her. In dress pants and jacket, his hair slicked back with comb, face cleaned with swipe and spittle. She watched him, walking up and over the lump they called hill, long before Paul could see her. Indistinguishable from the mounds of earth or bushes. Alberta a smudge on pale horizon.

Still. As varied as her places were, for escape in whatever form, Paul knew them all. He could feel her on his skin.

Deaf from birth, there were six years between them.

As he got closer, he saw her. He signed. Come back to the house, Paul said, mother is looking for you.

It was the day of their father's funeral. Three days after the truck had rolled, crushing his pelvis at the end of a speeding curve. Where did he have to go so quickly, she wondered. What she knew not to ask.

Alberta was fourteen years old, and she wondered about the end of her life. Approaching from the house, Paul saw Alberta rise to her feet and move toward him, brushing flecks of green and gold from her legs and hair. Paul turned and ran ahead, back through the weeds and the underbrush. Back through the branches and the fence. The dirt path between fields, dual tire ruts as old as the hills, that led back to the barn.

Alberta saw their mother wearing her best dress, standing outside beside Mr. Cooley's green pick up truck. Her dark eyes painted red from crying.

Every parent thinks their child as special, and searches for that glimmer of what's there, or what they hope to be. Beyond what they know is inherited from each parent, the special merge that becomes something other.

To her parents, Alberta was always a mystery. Something different. Something there, behind the eyes that her mother saw. Someday, her mother used to whisper, as she lifted her from the crib, you will do things that most of us can't dream.

Her father saw it too; the child Alberta, named for the very land. He tore stumps from the ground, and watched the toddler Alberta draw lines in the sand. He watched her draw maps, before she could write her name.

Her parents were very old, born and married to that place before. The old country. A fiction to her, but a story told with every breath. A history of countless wars and thick skin, of myths that multiplied and overlapped and spoke in the air. Tales of Baba Yaga. Alberta, named for the destination that they never quite made. Born *en route*, her parents arriving on new world soil and giving her birth. Giving her breath on a Montreal shore. Two weeks before they moved again.

The day after her father's funeral, Alberta in the local pool, a floor below

the hockey arena. One-piece suit and goggles tight over eyes and white cap over her thick dark hair. The world at this moment became mercurial, almost uteral. Alberta dreamed of one day becoming an olympic swimmer. Her father used to joke, only in these prairies could anyone dream of being an olympic swimmer. Only in this dry, mutable heat.

Her father always thought it strange, and her mother too, but there was never any argument. In larger prairie towns, the hotels boasted pools and water slides alongside other perks such as colour television and free cable. A benefit for those completely rural, or simply passing through. To escape for a weekend of collecting supplies. Foreign concepts introduced no longer foreign, as they became indelible. As much the land now as wheat, and cracks in the soil.

For her parents, to Alberta, even older than the soil, the notion remained foreign. Foreign, but unchallenged. Drives to the pool twice a week after school and once on Saturday for her to swim laps. Her mother, with constant book or magazine on imaginary shore. Harlequin romance novels, or *Chatelaine*. Waiting behind glass in the hall instead of beside the pool. The scent of chlorine a bad perfume. As she said, the damp always bothered her skin. Left welts the size and shape of a slap.

To Alberta it made perfect sense. Only on the prairie dry as dry would she dream of such a thing. Would she even dream. An absence from her pores she deemed necessary. To immerse herself in this weightless environment. Outside, beyond the protective glass, she would go through lip balm by the case, her father said, and often did. Soaked up into her. Strawberry, grape flavours soothing skin. During the drive home, her lips would always come out cracked.

In the community pool, Alberta lives between the strokes. Thrives. A creature born of water. Weightless and aiming her body like an arrow, legs and arms tight in a path drawn a straight line, thrust from one end of the pool to the other. Her only goal is speed. Speed, and breathing. But anything can be held.

For the time she exists in the pool, all else around her is suspended.

Alberta has seen what kills fathers—farm equipment, disease, physical labour. The cost of what they do against the land, above it. For mothers, it became more devious, killed by what was not. Living their lives beneath, instead of the surface of land. An absence. By the immediate lack that tore through bodies, and shriveled up what was left. She could see it in her mother, the part of her father that existed in her suddenly gone, as physical as had her lungs been removed as she slept, or her heart. What she could not live without.

For her mother, it was as though a switch had gone. Immediately moving to overtake the other role, but without the innate ability to quickly adapt. Her resources here stretched thin as it was.

Her mother moved through her day and days and withered. Rose into and eventually waned, like the moon.

Alberta remembers her first crush. Brian Friesen behind the skating rink when she was twelve years old. His round face and freckles, red hair like fire. The

thin hairs on his arm that stood up, as his arm brushed up against hers. Glowed yellow against his freckles and permanent tan. The tight fist of veins constricting in both their chests when they were close, a proximity that made the whole enterprise dangerous, and exciting. The word "heaved," that she had read in one of her mother's pulp novels that to them, didn't mean a thing. The flesh of their hands that burned like wax in equal vice and first kiss, melting away the borders. They were the same.

They were the same for a week, maybe two, before he did the same with the Simpson girl a grade ahead with the early breasts and flirty mouth and that was that.

Alberta, suddenly on the wrong side of a line she hadn't drawn.

If Alberta was a creature of water, Paul was a creature of land. Permanent shovel and dog by his side, the two digging holes and pulling out one thing, to replace with another. Secret treasure, and stories of pirates. Paul with a bandanna on his head. Construction paper scraps, a parrot.

In the field by the tree line, an abandoned boat slowly rotting into the ground, where Alberta and Paul would make up stories of lost ships, and weeks out at sea. Leaping out from the dusty sides into what the two of them shared, but in dreams. An ocean of land.

Alberta considered the water. It was a day during the week she would have done laps. What else she would lose. Paul's dog in the bushes tearing at roots, and gopher-holes. Barking where Paul couldn't see. Paul with a shoe box of costume jewelry as his treasure-chest. Once hers when she was younger, and used to play dress-up.

A mess of wind swirling spirals of dusty snow. A horizon without end.

Alberta swam back to shore. This is not what she wanted. Through some demented accident of birth and geography. She took some comfort there, in the sheer randomness, but knew this was not where she is meant to be. She returned to the house.

Alberta is slight; has a dancer's body. Lithe. Small. Almost wiry but more muscular. A soundless music that wove through her head, that followed her in rhythm as she walked. What her mother had done before her parents were married, what she did when they met. She had what her mother had, a form that could cleave through air and water equally, as though she were a knife. A jagged edge.

Three weeks after the funeral, Alberta's mother informed her that the weekly swimming would have to end; that they could no longer afford her membership to the community centre. It was a crushing blow.

At the kitchen table, Alberta's mother, Emma held her cup of tea, warming her hands. Her husband had been dead and buried for three weeks, far from the country that bore them, and their parents in turn. Alberta had come in through the

back door, dropping her school bag on a chair, and opened the refrigerator. A parcel of torn envelopes and papers on the table. Alberta, she began, Alberta.

There would be no more swimming. There would be no more for so many things. Waiting on the insurance money for a new truck. The cost of funerals, even at cremation. None of this was explained to her; none of this would have mattered. It only mattered to her mother.

Alberta, wide eyes turning thin, like daggers. Shooting sparks. Alberta slamming the fridge door and storming out of the room. Out of the house. Gone.

Alberta imagined Lot's wife, or was it Job, from Bible studies. Turning to witness the destruction of their abandoned city, friends and neighbours both, to be turned by a vengeful God into a pillar of salt. *A pillar of salt*. Alberta wondered if this meant a small block of salt replaced where her body stood, or if the shape of her body was reformed in hard salt. As the rest of them ran, a statue of blue-white standing suddenly still.

She wondered, too, if this nameless wife began to melt with the first rain, or was dry enough in the desert that grains would begin to loosen and drift in the unforgiving wind, hammering down on salt flesh. A wind no different than her life long prairie.

Like a fish needs a bicycle. Alberta out of the water standing cool, dry behind the house where she lives. Her skin already beginning to flake.

That next morning, she noticed, bits of dead skin already appearing on her pillow.

Two months after her father died, the snow on the ground like a cancer. Alberta stomped her feet with each step, made snow-bloody footprints across the yard.

There was no part of this that she liked. Not that her approval made much difference. Her mother's swift betrayal with a man from town she barely knew. Who drove a truck down highway one, and had a beard. She would not call him father. She refused. Not that she had been asked. She braced herself for the blow. She imagined it as a bat, swung hard into the bull's-eye of her stomach.

Alberta felt herself bend at the thought of the blow, hands reaching for her abdomen. A cramp. Sympathy pains for her own imagined wound? No. A real cramp. Again. Hell damn, she thought. She swore under her breath. All she knew how. She made her slow way across the yard to the kitchen door. All the time, the wind whipping snow and geography around the house.

What if I die tomorrow, Alberta wondered. What if I die. And then, she thought, where would they be.

At school, Alberta's best friend was a girl named Mary. Feral red hair, long and indistinguishable from the autumn hills. Layers of coloured clothes, and whose mother was about as different from her own as could be. Wild, exuberant. A visual artist, a painter, spending long hours and days in her studio in the old barn slashing

abstract oils onto large canvasses. Her father, a painter too, but more quiet than his wife. Working his system of rabbit skin sketches, inspired by Dutch masters, painting 17th Century lace so realistic that Alberta was afraid to even breathe in front of them. Afraid they would move, and shake her sense of reality to its foundations.

At Mary's house, there were many absences. An empty house as her parents worked.

At Christmas, Mary and her mother baked hundreds of cookies in dozens of animal shapes, each painted by hand by the two women. Mary's mother, shortening her daughter's name to initial Em. A sound that closed seamlessly into itself. Alberta thought of her mother.

Alberta and Mary would spend afternoons in one of the fields or behind the house, after a quick pilfer from Mary's mother's studio, and lie in the snow-dusted weeds in a smoke-coloured haze. Before Mary, Alberta had never even heard of pot smoking. She had barely considered cigarettes, watching the old men on the step of the general store as though they'd been born there and forever since, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes and waiting for something to happen. Waiting for the rain to begin, and commenting on it all the while, interspersed with stories of what used to be, when they were younger men.

The day the old men made the mistake of commenting on Mary's wild hair and clothes, a stitch and a creepy smile, and the fire in her eyes that left a swift kick on the calf of the closest one. The old men that smelled sickly sweet of beets and vinegar; the old men that smelled of their own dark sweat and copper breath. The light that tore red through her skull. A filament of Cree blood boiling beneath her skin, mixed in with what else. Russian, Scottish, American. An ethnic soup that raged from fingertip to fingertip. Alberta knew, this place would not hold her. Alberta knew, she would be the first to leave.

Alberta kept to her journal and let everything else slide. She wrote out her hurts and her hates, and she hid them between the mattress and box spring, away from prying eyes.

After her father died, her mother finally had to learn how to drive, otherwise they were trapped where they were, the three of them in their big empty house. Cabin fever, or stir-crazy. Anything with a higher temperature, deepening to boil. They couldn't keep depending on neighbours to take Emma in to town for groceries and other errands, or the first few weeks of prepared meals after the funeral, nearly a dozen women in the area, every night, taking turns.

It was Mrs. Friesen, Brian's mother, who had offered to teach her, afternoons Alberta and Paul watched their mother drive circles around the yard; Mrs. Friesen the passenger, calm. Their mother a wreck.

Emma wound so tight she was kinetic; a spring. A spring that only explodes out before coiling up again, slowly squeezing the air out before another release. Alberta and her brother learned to walk on glass; whether cracked or shattered

depended completely on their mother.

Alberta tried to persuade her mother that she should be learning too, but Emma wouldn't hear it. You're too young, she said. Paul simply wanted to go along for the ride, pounding gleeful palms on the window or backseat as they drove in circles. As they drove in eventual squares, turning corner on dusty corner around quarters in two mile stretches.

Needless to say, whenever Mrs. Friesen came over for Emma to learn to drive what was once their father's car, the children were relegated into the house. At least until the engine stopped, and the two women came in for tea.

In the end, Emma drove herself a month before her license took effect. Everyone in town knew. If you were to ask anyone about it, no one would admit to knowing anything, but would have called it special circumstances. You don't expect three people to stay out in the middle of nowhere without a car, do you? Even less if they have one. Emma something stronger when no one else was looking.

For Emma, beginning to drive herself on roads she thought memorized, lost her way as quickly as she found it again, more than a few times. Roads she thought she knew but less than she remembered. It was like re-learning a language after a stroke, with the frustration of taking longer to get anywhere moving slowly to the joy of discovery, of parts of the land around that she previously hadn't known.

Once she was a bit more comfortable, she took to driving on Sunday afternoons, by herself or with Paul, in a different direction from the house simply to see where she might end up. She used a series of highway around and the valley below as her boundaries; when she came to one, however she got there, she would return home the way that she knew, back along a more familiar series of turns and straight lines.

For Alberta, it felt nearly impossible to get lost on a grid. There was time, and then there was only time, turning left or right or heading straight through.

It seems too obvious to mention that Alberta dreamed of escape, but to where. If there was as much sky as what was under it, her choices would be infinite. Even the direction itself didn't matter, whether the rise from the west, or sloping down to the east. Each side held its appeal. Or to float down the hidden river that sat miles beneath her.

After her father's death, shopping with her mother became more tense. Alberta, Emma and Paul, walked through a strip mall an hours drive from the house. Emma, tired but driven. Up at dawn rolling dough for bread, leaving it rise under damp cheesecloth at home. What they would tiptoe around. Dozens of loaves. For a bakery in town. If Emma saw her, or her brother, they would be forced to join in. Alberta working soft brown with her hands. Pounding with whole wheat flour that padded soft sounds on the floor as it dropped, in small handfuls. That made

footprints from the dog, or white puff on his dark nose.

In the discount clothing store, Alberta caught a slap from Emma's hand, on the back of her shoulder. She was humming too loudly again, nearly singing out loud. A habit she got into from spending so much time alone, or with Paul. Releasing the music in her head. The soundtrack to every piece of her, everything that she does. She said nothing, but glared at her mother. She said not a word for the rest of their excursion. She said nothing else for the rest of the day. Her green eyes shot daggers; her green eyes shot knives. Their mother didn't notice, but Paul did.

Out of water, Alberta felt the full weight of gravity. Her body became stone, her feet turned to lead weights. She felt the air push against her face as she struggled to walk, wondered how it felt to be truly weightless, a creature of air.

To Alberta, there was no such thing as normal. The things that they used to do, ordinary activities were suddenly more difficult, with even the simplest act wrought with new tensions—shopping, going to school, dinner. Every act took on a new and tainted air. At school, no longer just the quiet girl, but the girl with the dead father. Alberta had never lost anyone before, but to Emma, it was far more. As though even their reactions to each other suddenly changed. Who they were, and what they were doing.

Alberta didn't know if she's the water or the fuel to her mother's fire, but knew she was something liquid. Something pure. Her body pushed out impurities with a violent grace. Quickly, and unapologetically.

Mary knew the difference. Of what a parent was supposed to do, and what they weren't. At least that what she told Alberta. Her own were examples of both, moving to such extremes that neither end she found terribly useful. As she felt, trapped in her own freedoms.

Not that Alberta saw that side, or would have understood. She saw only the freedoms at the end of Mary's smile. As her own heart lit up. With equal excitement and envy.

During the long drive home, it felt so much longer. She cursed her mother under her breath.

When they reached an intersection, the road across their path firing straight and endless in both directions, Alberta stared so hard into the dot that made the line that the two ends looped around, and connected. Repeating grain elevators and water towers, and secret rail. Where hills and fields rolled wind into empty flow; where no tree, building or body could ever give a sense of space, and where there was no forgiveness.

To Alberta it felt as though they were about to cross an old and sacred line. It felt as though they were crossing something you couldn't go back on.