

almas

*the story of a brother, a sister,
and the power of the imagination*

Al(m)as

Second Edition

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Panicked thoughts rattled in his brain to the rhythm of the bouncing ambulance.

She can't be, she can't be, she can't be

No, no, no, please, God, no...

Why? Why her? Why me? Why us?

The weekend had begun so pleasantly before it spiraled into chaos.

* * *

"C'mon, Nells," Patrick insisted. "We have to go home before it gets dark."

"I don't wanna," his little sister sang out as she started up the ladder to the slide for the twentieth time.

Patrick sighed and started walking in the direction of the play structure toward the incorrigible five-year-old. "Nellie, I'm counting! One...two...thr—"

"WAIT!" Nellie yelled from the top of the slide, waving her arms and shaking her blond curls furiously. "What are you counting to?"

Patrick rolled his eyes. "Five. I'm counting to five. Three...four..."

Nellie shrieked and hopped onto the slide, flying down the

metal chute and only just getting her feet beneath her in time to spring to her brother's side.

"Five!" Patrick barked, trying his best to smother a grin. "You made it. Barely."

She grabbed his hand and looked up at him, a smile on her face and a sparkle in her eye. Her blue eyes stared into his brown ones, wide and trusting, and she retorted, "Course I did. I'm an angel, aren't I?"

"Yeah, and angels can—" Patrick began—"FLY!" they both cried in unison as Patrick scooped up his little sister around the middle, balanced her on his shoulder, and began to run. Nellie giggled in delight and spread her arms wide, her limbs bouncing up and down wildly with each step.

They arrived back home giddy and breathless just as the sun was setting. Patrick set Nellie down on the ground in front of their house, his happy mood sinking with the sun. He always enjoyed their idyllic evenings at the park. If only they could stay there forever.

Patrick's eyes snapped open to a deafening *CRACK*. Startled, he rolled over in bed and propped himself up on an elbow, scanning the shadows of his small room. The various shades of black were broken only by the gray outline of his window.

The sound came again, crackling and snapping—thunder. As he

eased back onto his pillows, his door creaked open and a petite form appeared in the doorway.

"Patty?" Nellie's voice quavered. "I'm scared."

"Come here," he offered, patting the mattress.

She sprang across the wood floor as the next peal of thunder shook the room and snuggled into the covers beside him. "Tell me a story?"

Patrick closed his eyes and wrapped his sister in his arms.

Once there lived a beautiful girl named
Princess Nellie.

"No, no, you're telling it wrong. You didn't say 'once upon a time.'
And she's a fairy princess!"

He paused for a moment, thinking, and began again.

Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful
fairy princess named Nellie. She had curly,
blond hair and bright blue eyes. But most
beautiful of all were her wings: shimmering
sapphire and turquoise and aquamarine,
every shade of blue imaginable and sparkly
like a waterfall on a sunny spring day.

Nellie cuddled closer, hanging on every word, all objections forgotten. Patrick finished the story without further

interruption, a magnificent tale of good deeds rewarded, bad ones punished, and lighthearted adventure. By the time he uttered the sacred words "the end," Nellie had already drifted off into peaceful sleep.

When Patrick woke, he was alone. His room was dim, but the clock read 11 am. Saturday. He dragged himself out of bed with a groan and walked over to the window. His frown deepened as he considered the view. Rainy and dark. He hated the rain almost as much as he hated the weekend.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and changed out of his rumpled t-shirt and gym shorts into jeans and a long-sleeved brown sweater. Glancing in the mirror, he blinked owlishly and ran nervous fingers through his short hair. Maybe if he was quick enough...

He exhaled a controlled breath and grabbed his rain jacket from the back of his desk chair on his way out the door. Once in the hallway, he sped straight through the open door across from his own. As usual, Nellie was already awake, sitting on her floor with a mermaid in one hand and a baby doll in the other, narrating aloud in a high-pitched voice. She crooned, "It's okay, don't cry," as she brought the two dolls together, turning the mermaid's arms so they embraced the doll. "It's okay."

"Hi, Nells," Patrick said softly, closing the door behind him. "Want to go for a walk?"

“Yeah!” she cried.

“Alright. But you’ll have to put on your coat and rain boots, because it’s raining.”

“We’re gonna go for a walk in the *rain*?” Nellie’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“Well, more like sprinkling, but I’ll let you splash in the puddles if you hurry and get dressed,” Patrick promised.

“Okay!” Nellie dropped the dolls and ran to her closet, burrowing through piles of discarded clothes before emerging triumphant, boots on feet and jacket in hand. She shrugged on the jacket over the clothes she had chosen for the day, pink leggings and a short sky-blue dress with an attached tutu.

“Ready?” Patrick asked. “You won’t be too cold in that outfit?”

“Nope!” She grinned.

“Good.” He looked her up and down. The coat came to her mid-thighs and the boots to her knees; she should be fine. “We’re going to go downstairs now, but you have to be really quiet, okay?”

“Okay,” she replied, her expression becoming serious.

They left the room together. As they walked down the stairs Nellie slipped her small hand into Patrick’s. He gave it a light squeeze and they made their way furtively to the front door.

He slipped into his rain boots and put his hand on the door knob.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a male voice snapped. Their father.

“Out,” Patrick answered, opening the door. He hoped for the best, but knew it was too late: the voice sounded sober.

“Wait.” The man shook his head. “Come here, boy.” He said it without any particular inflection, and yet the words still sent a shiver down Patrick’s spine.

Patrick closed the door. Stealing a glance at Nellie, he obeyed. He walked into the kitchen where their father stood, but warily stopped a couple yards short.

He contemplated the man whom he called father. A man with eyes the various shades of mud and hair the color of excrement; short of stature, shorter of character; pale, hairy flesh showing where his skintight tee cried mercy before the rolls of fat; his very essence nothing but foul reek.

Even from here he could still smell the acrid fumes wafting from the man’s breath and clothes, the pungent odor of alcohol accompanying the omnipresent stench of cigarette smoke. Drinking, then, but not drunk. Not yet.

“You shouldn’t take her out in the rain,” the man said. “You want her to get sick?”

Like you care, Patrick thought viciously. Like you ever care, except on the rare occasion you're not drunk out of your mind.
“She has a coat. It'll be fun.”

“Fun? Who's gonna take care of her when she stays home from kindergarten because her idiot brother let her catch her death out in the cold?”

Certainly not you. “I don't think—”

“No, you don't.” His father stepped forward and Patrick flinched involuntarily. The man laid a grimy hand heavily on his son's shoulder. “You're staying inside.”

Patrick was lying in bed staring up at his ceiling when he realized the rain had stopped. The sun had already set, cloaking the house in dusky twilight.

He stood up and cautiously emerged from his room. He would need to eat sometime, and he had better make sure Nellie had eaten, too.

As he crept downstairs, he prayed to the god he hadn't believed in since his mother died that his father would be somewhere, anywhere else.

He wasn't.

“Hey, boy,” the man slurred from a tattered armchair in the living room. “What’re ya doin’ down’ere? Thought ya might’a decided t’off yourself n’ saved me th’trouble.”

“Just getting food,” Patrick mumbled, slipping past his inebriated father into the kitchen. Nellie was there, sitting on the floor and munching on cereal directly out of the open pantry. “Nells, do you want some real dinner?”

His father heaved himself up out of the chair and staggered into the kitchen. Patrick’s heart thundered.

“I c’n make her dinner,” the man spat. “C’mere, Nellie. Daddy’ll take care’a ya.” He held out his arms and stooped toward the girl, who eyed him anxiously.

“Stay away from her,” Patrick snapped, the words out of his mouth quicker than thought. After their drunk father had accidentally wrenched his sister’s shoulder, Patrick had sworn he would never, ever let it happen again.

“What?” The man straightened to his full height, his short figure still towering over that of his fourteen-year-old son. He spoke slowly, enunciating every rage-filled word, “What—did—you—SAY TO ME?!”

“You’re drunk. Leave her alone,” Patrick said, his voice shaky, but determined.

“M’her FATHER, for gossake. I c’n make her dinner helluvalot better’n some lil *brat*.” He lurched toward Nellie, grabbing her

more roughly than he had intended. She cried out, frightened.

“Leave her alone!” Patrick yelled. He launched himself between them, breaking his father’s grip on Nellie and hoisting her into his arms.

He almost heard the whistle of wind before the open-handed blow struck his ear, but he didn’t care, he didn’t care, he just needed to get his sister far, far away. He ducked his head and ran, Nellie clinging to him desperately, another blow just missing his arm as they left the kitchen, left the house, left the terrifying scene behind.

Nellie sobbed into his shoulder. Patrick hugged her tightly, his pulse still racing as he sat on the dark play structure with his sister in his lap. “It’s okay, Nells. It’s okay. I’m here. It’s okay.” He repeated the words for seconds, minutes, hours—he didn’t know how long—until they both caught their breath.

“T-t-tell me a story?” Nellie pleaded, teeth chattering. Her brother took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Shaken as he was, it took him longer than usual to immerse himself in the tale.

Once upon a time...there lived a... beautiful princess—a beautiful *fairy* princess—named Nellie. She had rosy cheeks...and a brilliant white smile. But most beautiful of all were her wings—twinkling turquoise and

sapphire and aquamarine, every shade of blue imaginable and sparkly like a waterfall on a sunny spring day.

One day, Princess Nellie went for a walk in the forest. She wove her way through green vines and leafy branches, dancing over the mossy ground. She decided to visit one of her good friends, Mr. Bear.

When she arrived at Mr. Bear's cave, he wasn't there. She looked around and found him in the middle of, um, a bunch of...haliberry bushes.

"What are you doing in there, Mr. Bear?" Princess Nellie called out. "You're not eating them, are you? You know how grumpy you get when you eat haliberries!"

Mr. Bear just roared and began slashing his way out of the haliberry bushes toward her.

"Mr. Bear, it's me! It's Princess Nellie!" she cried, but he cleared the bushes and charged forward on all fours, hurting her ears with his earth-shattering roars. The smell of torn leaves and smashed haliberries filled her nostrils.

At the last second, just before the bear

reached her, she fluttered her beautiful blue wings and sprang into the air. Mr. Bear roared and roared, looking up at her with glittering brown eyes, but she was safe, flying high above his head.

“Is Mr. Bear a *bad* bear?” Nellie broke in.

Patrick replied hesitantly, “No, Mr. Bear isn’t a bad bear.”

“Then why did he attack Princess Nellie?”

“He made a bad decision. Do you know what the bad decision was?”

“Eating the haliberies?”

“Yep.”

Nellie pondered that. “So what happened next?”

“Oh, Princess Nellie’s wings beat fast as a hummingbird’s and took her back home, safe and sound.”

“Were Princess Nellie and Mr. Bear still friends, even though Mr. Bear was mean to her?”

Patrick paused. Feeling like his heart was being ripped out of his chest, he said, “I don’t know, Nells. I don’t know.”

The next day the sun was shining bright, with no trace of yesterday's dismal clouds. Last night, Patrick and Nellie had waited in the park for a couple hours, then snuck back into the house. Their father was sprawled on the couch, snoring loudly. Patrick hoped he wouldn't remember any of the night's events when he woke.

For once, his wish was granted. That Sunday morning was uneventful, almost peaceful. His father complained of a splitting headache and remained immobile on the couch, not even bothering to get up and open a new bottle.

Rrring! Rrring! Rrrrrrrring! Patrick's phone shattered the tranquility.

"Shut that thing *off*," his father groaned.

Patrick hastily picked up and went upstairs.

It was his friend Mark, in a panic. "I broke it! I can't believe I broke it! You have to help me, dude. Please!"

"Whoa, Mark, calm down. What happened?" Patrick said.

"I wanted to go get my mom a present for her birthday tomorrow, but my dad is at a conference for the weekend," Mark blubbered. "I forgot to go shopping with him before he left, so when my mom left to do errands, I figured I'd just borrow his bike and run over to Hammond's. But on the way back I kinda got distracted and um...ran into a tree and now it's broken and

it's his super expensive bike that's like his favorite thing in the world and he's gonna *kill* me! Please, Patrick. You're the only person I can think of who might be able to fix it and my parents are both gonna be home soon!"

"O-kayyy. I guess I can try. Is it alright if I bring my little sister with me?" Patrick said.

"Nellie? No way! Are you kidding me? I need this done ASAP, pronto, *rightnowbeforemyparentsKILLme!* No distractions!"

"I can't just leave her at home," Patrick objected.

"Come on, *please*, she'll be fine! I'm already back at my house, it'll be quick, like an hour tops! Please!" Mark begged.

Patrick considered for a moment. When his dad got headaches, he usually didn't drink for the next few hours at least. It shouldn't be a problem. "Fine," he said. "I'll walk over now."

Patrick rubbed the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, leaving a smudge of bike grease above his right eyebrow. This was ridiculous. They had been at it for hours—the "quick" bike repair was proving to be anything but. He was opening his mouth to tell Mark he could not stay much longer when his cell phone rang. It was his father. Patrick grimaced and flipped his phone open.

"Hello?" he said, nestling the phone between his chin and

shoulder. “Dad? Daaaaaa-aaaad?” Patrick’s eyes rolled up to the ceiling in frustration. “Dad!”

“Wha? Whosis?”

“It’s Patrick. You called me.”

“Didn’t.”

“Have you been drinking? Where’s Nellie?”

“Dunno.”

“Dad, where’s Nellie?”

“Dunno! Playing. S’mwhere.”

“Dad, listen to me. I’m coming home. But you need to find her, okay? Look for Nellie.” Patrick hung up and glanced apologetically at Mark. “I have to go, man. Sorry.”

He hurried out of the garage. *Idiot, idiot, idiot*, he berated himself. What was he thinking? If there was anything he could trust his father to do, it was get drunk. Of course he would lose track of Nellie. She was probably just playing in her room, but God only knew what sort of mischief the five-year-old could get into unsupervised.

As he walked, it occurred to him he hadn’t bolted the door when he left the house. Nellie wouldn’t wander off on her own, would she? He wasn’t sure. Worry morphed into guilt. If anything

happened, it would be his fault. But what could possibly happen? Well. She could leave the house and get lost. She could climb up something and not be able to get down, or fall. She could try to use the toaster or stove or knives or...

Guilt became terror and he broke into a run.

Patrick raced down the sidewalk, sweat trickling down his back. As he came within sight of his house he skidded to a halt. There, across the street, sat Nellie, playing in the flowers in their front yard.

Anger and relief surged in him, the first directed at his father's negligence and the second flowing from the glorious knowledge that Nellie was safe. He squatted and rested his forearms on his knees, breathing in ragged gasps.

"PATTY!" a young voice cried with delight. He looked up. Arms thrown up in excitement, Nellie was running—

—running into the street.

No, wait—

—running—

—brakes squealing—

a blur and a silence and a form—crumpled

—he was screaming—

so small so small so very very small

—he was kneeling beside her—

so still so still so very very still

someone, anyone—his father, there

HELP! GET HELP!

not breathing is she breathing don't know don't know how do you know

—his father staring, not moving—

worthless

someone, anyone—the truck's driver, there

—walking, apprehensive turned apologetic turned
horrified—

as he saw, he saw her, *oh God no, not a girl, not a little girl*

HELP! CALL 911!

—driver jabbering into cell phone—

is she dead is she dead she can't be dead

she can't be

—sirens wailing, uniforms rushing—

she can't be she can't be she can't be

—name, boy, her name?—

Nellie.

Nellie.

NELLIE!

Patrick sat with his shoulders hunched and eyes downcast, as far away from his father as he could get in the small waiting room. He had spent the last few days in a miserable haze. He still had not seen Nellie since they wheeled her out of the ambulance and down some hallway out of sight, their urgent tones echoing off white walls made harsh by fluorescent lighting.

His only clear memory was the sensation of all-encompassing fear. The others were simply fragments.

Screaming at his father, running at him and pummeling him with his fists as the man just stood there, eyes dead.

Frightful words—critical condition, internal bleeding, ICU—he remembered the words, but not what they meant.

Fiercely fighting back tears as he begged the doctor to tell him about his sister while the doctor remained silent, only saying something about waiting for her condition to stabilize.

His father telling him he should go home and rest, and Patrick despising him for the suggestion.

Sleeping stretched across the hard chairs, haunted by horrible dreams, waking every few hours with a start and a pang of guilt. How could he sleep at a time like this?

The hours passed in bursts, dragging by one moment and racing forward the next. Through it all, Patrick felt numb. His fault. All his fault. His little sister was hurt, dying, or dead and it was all his fault.

He was lying on his side shivering wretchedly when a man in blue scrubs entered the room. Patrick and his father immediately sat up at attention.

The doctor began, "I'm sorry to say I have both good news and bad news."

Patrick caught his breath.

"Most importantly, she has passed through the worst of it, and it looks like she'll be able to pull through. She's awake now—exhausted and medicated for the pain, but in surprisingly good

spirits, considering the trauma she has experienced. She asked to see you."

He fixed Patrick with his steady gaze for a moment before continuing, "The bad news is that she is paralyzed from the waist down. Since she is so young, the dangers of surgery outweigh the potential benefits. There is very little chance that she will recover and her condition is almost certainly permanent. I'm so sorry."

"I know this is a lot to process, but do you have any questions for me at this time?"

Patrick's back struck the chair with a loud thud. Nellie, who loved nothing more than to run and play? Nellie, who he took to the park almost every day? Nellie, his baby sister, paralyzed? He just sat there, stunned. His father said nothing.

"If you don't have any questions, I'll leave you two alone," the doctor said gently after a couple minutes. "But she did seem anxious to see you. We haven't told her any of the specifics of her condition, only that she had an accident. Considering her age, we thought it might be better if it came from you."

There was an implied plural in the "you"—of course, such a terrible burden should be shared by both father and son. But Patrick would not let his father in that room, not until he had a chance to make sure she was alright. Nellie, paralyzed, and he would be the one to tell her. Patrick's heart froze into a hard, lifeless lump and shattered into a hundred pieces.

Patrick shouldered his way into the hospital room, glad to have permission to visit his sister, but afraid of what he would see.

"Patty." Nellie welcomed him with a small smile, then winced, saying, "Why do they have all these *things* stuck on me?"

Her tiny form was covered with bandages and purple bruises, dwarfed by the enormous hospital bed. Patrick struggled to absorb the IV in her arm, the various monitors attached to her hands and chest, the sterile smell of antiseptic in the air.

"Do you know what happened?" Patrick managed to choke out.

"They said I had an accident," Nellie said.

"Yeah." Patrick couldn't think of any way to tell her the awful truth. But if he didn't say it now, he might never work up the courage. The thought of that doctor, or his father, delivering the news spurred him onward.

"Nells," he said, "the doctor said you're paralyzed. Do you know what that means?"

"No."

"It means...it means you can't move your legs. You can't walk."

"How long till I get better?" she asked.

"They don't know. Maybe never." His heart broke yet again.

She just looked at him. "I can never walk...ever?"

He hated himself as he answered, "No, Nells. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She kept staring at him blankly, processing the information. He waited for her to react. She didn't.

"Nellie, are you okay?" he asked, cursing himself as soon as the words left his mouth. Of course she wasn't.

"Yeah," she said.

What? "Are you sure? Did you understand what I told you?"

"Yeah," she repeated, appearing unimpressed.

"Are you...worried, at all?" he insisted.

"Nope."

She must not understand. Patrick felt like a monster as he began again, "Nells, I don't think you get it. The doctor said—"

"I know," she interrupted. "I can never walk again. But I'm not worried."

"How come?" Patrick sputtered, confused, shocked.

"Pat - ty," she scolded, looking at him reprovingly. "I'm an angel, remember? I don't need to walk. I can fly."

The tears flowed unchecked down Patrick's face as he took Nellie's free hand in both of his and kissed it. "Oh, of course," he croaked. "How could I forget?"

Author's Comments

Thank you so much for reading my work. I hope you enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you have any reaction to Al(m)as, from "fantastic" to "meh" to a three-page-long commentary, please share it with me either via an email to beholdtheinfinite@gmail.com or by commenting on my creative writing blog, Behold the Infinite, which you can find here:

www.beholdtheinfinite.wordpress.com

You can also find Al(m)as at the link below, though I encourage you to browse my creative nonfiction and poetry pieces as well.

beholdtheinfinite.wordpress.com/category/fiction/almas/

P.S. If you're curious about the title, *alma* is Spanish for soul, and *alas* are wings. Take from that what you will.