

ALEXIA

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Alexia
by Jessica Poli

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*I opened a book thinking it was my story.
Then I opened another book.*

Michael Burkard

Alexia grows a flock of doves from seeds she finds under a rotting soda box, and I think *Things always work out for her*. Anywhere she goes, Alexia is voted most popular. Her teeth are whiter than anyone's teeth. She swears she was born on the moon and everyone believes her, their eyes wide as water dishes as she shows us a crescent-shaped birthmark above her left hip. I don't know if I believe her. Still, seeing that glimpse of skin is exciting.

Alexia says that after she was born on the moon she fell to Earth and landed in the sea. She doesn't say which one, which makes me suspect it isn't true. Especially because what comes next in the story is that a whale scooped her up in its cavern-like mouth and she lived there until last year, when she was old enough to go to school, and now here she is.

Some nights I dream about Alexia. She's rowing a boat and I'm floating along beside it. She asks me if I'd like a piece of cake. "No cake," I say, then ask for a lock of her hair instead. She saws off a piece with the cake knife and hands it to me, but as soon as the strands touch the water they disappear.

Airplanes are always coming and going. From my favorite spot under my favorite tree in the front yard, I watch them crawling across the sky. At school, Mrs. Leipold shows us a website of a map of the world covered with little yellow airplanes. The map tracks where the planes are at any moment. Every seven seconds, they all shift slightly in whatever direction they're going. According to the website there are 6,993 planes in the air. If you knew the number of a plane, you could type it in and see it on the map. If you saw a plane flying over your house, you could look at the website and see where it was going. If Alexia was flying somewhere, I could watch her plane inch across the map on the computer in my bedroom.

We file outside when it's time for recess. Near the basketball hoop, the blacktop is painted with a huge map of the United States. Whoever runs the fastest to the map has their first pick of what state is theirs. I pick Montana because of the pictures I've seen of prairies and big sprawling skies. One day, Alexia picks Alaska and everyone clamors to the states in the top left of the map to be closer to her. The next day all of the school's library books about Alaska are checked out, and at lunchtime all the girls are talking about Eskimos and igloos, discussing the best kind of furs for a parka lining.

One morning I look in the mirror and my eyes are different—instead of brown, they look more like Alexia’s green-blue eyes. The next morning my nose looks a little shorter, and the next, my hair seems lighter, closer to Alexia’s particular shade of brown. I keep looking for a birthmark to appear on my hip, but so far, nothing.

What if a person is looking at the plane-tracking website watching a plane that someone they love is on and the plane crashes? Would it disappear from the map? Would they know what happened?

I write a research paper on the migration patterns of mourning doves. According to the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, mourning doves are proficient at flying at around 30 days of age. They migrate twice a year, in the spring and fall. Some birds will choose not to migrate at all because of the abundance of food in bird feeders. I decide to buy a bird feeder with my allowance money.

Planes are like birds only less believable. On Amelia Earhart Day, Mrs. Leipold has us make posters to hang around the school. We print photos in the computer lab of Amelia and glue them onto construction paper, then write facts on the paper with scented markers. I choose grey-blue paper to match the ocean and, according to her pilot's license, the color of Amelia's eyes.

According to the Amelia Earhart Museum's website, Amelia and her sister Muriel once had two imaginary horses named Saladin and Beelzebub. If I had an imaginary horse, I would name it Apollo. If Alexia had an imaginary horse, we could ride away together.

Horses don't sing. A bird building a nest on a horse would be something. If the horse walked past and the bird was singing, you might think that the horse was singing.

Two birds build a nest in the rain gutter outside my window. I watch them for hours with a bird identification book that I got for Christmas across my lap. Finally I identify them as barn swallows, *Hirundo rustica*, subspecies *H. r. erythrogaster*. Barn swallows lay 4-6 eggs on average and will mob predators that come too close to their nest. Dad says that if the baby birds don't leave the nest in time, a hard rain will flood the downspout and wash them away.

My transformation doesn't stop. By spring, I could almost pass for Alexia's identical twin. My parents don't seem concerned and only tell me that my hair looks nice and what a wonderful color my eyes are now. No one at school has noticed. Or if they do, they don't say anything about it. Every night, after my parents have gone to sleep, I tip-toe to the bathroom to stare in the mirror, looking for signs of my face changing, staring without blinking for as long as I possibly can in case I miss anything.

Doves belong to the bird clade Columbidae, which includes close to 310 species. They vary in size but tend to have short legs, small heads, and compact bodies. Columbidae build nests out of sticks, straw, and other debris, and lay one or two eggs at a time. Both parents care for their young until they are ready to leave the nest.

One day I overhear Mom talking on the phone to Lydia, a neighbor from three blocks down who always wears big floral bathrobes and smells like burnt cinnamon rolls and sour milk. “Such a shame,” she says into the phone, “They seemed so happy. I guess you can never tell though, can you? I wonder which one of them will take her.”

That night I dream that Alexia and I are sitting on the moon, drawing pictures by dragging pieces of meteor through the lunar dust. I draw a horse riding an airplane into the sunset. Alexia draws an enormous house underwater.

When it's dark and raining, houses are like boats.
You look outside and all the land could be water.
The light across the street could be a lighthouse on a
rocky shore that we're about to crash into.

One day, Alexia stops coming to school. By then my transformation is complete, and at lunch-time I'm asked to sit at her table. "Tell us again about the moon, Alexia" her friends say, and the story spills out of my mouth and onto the table like a newborn dove.

Apollo is the Greek god of light and sun, and also of music, prophecy, and plague. One legend says that in the winter he rode on the back of a swan to live with the Hyperboreans, where the sun shone twenty-four hours a day.

Dear Alexia,

I don't know where you are, but I'm sorry you're gone. The world can be bad. When winter comes, I'll look for you. Wait for me.

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