

SONJA LIVINGSTON

Albion Season

Let my time in Albion equal one long muggy season. Though my days in the faded farm town number nearly three years, memory shrugs gauzy shoulders and pays no mind. She stretches and sighs, sprawls out on her back, eyes to the sky. Memory allows thigh-high snowdrifts on the Fourth of July, has rivers crest and spill when their beds are no more than ash. Shush. Leave your chilly-fingered counting behind. Though the town and her orchards lie in the frozen foothold of the Great Lakes, memory sweats, makes Albion summer as stubborn as honeysuckle vine. Farewell to order. For there are whole lifetimes in one Albion season, August is king, and I am five and six and sometimes seven.

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The pink takes. It is not soft, as pink should be. The color is fixed to our walls while we live in the big old house in Albion. White plaster crumbles through the pink like whitecaps on a Pepto-Bismol sea. I stare into those breaks each night. The festering plaster takes hold of me. I am a knuckle-headed girl with more time than options, so I stare and stare into those frothy white holes and wait.

Everyone loves Cher. My oldest sister and meanest cousin sing her gypsy songs while sashaying under trees. They are girls becoming women, their bodies pained with growth—they have no choice but to dance under dappled leaves, to soak themselves in the black-magic incense salve of Cher. Though my body is far from womanhood, I need her too. The buck-skinned woman looks out to me from the top of a lopsided pile of my mother's music. Cher is radiant astride her palomino and cool, even in the desert heat. At night, she comes for me on that very same horse, entering my room through a hole in the crumbling walls.

The gallop is first. Hooves sound with heartbeat swish and rhythm. Then her. Glowing, shining, a sword of light. A stream of raven-black hair follows crescent moon eyes as she scoops me up from the bed I share with two or three sisters and my mother.

She shakes me gently, calls me little bird. And off we fly. To the dusty mountain pass of her album cover, to the blinding glitter of Hollywood, or to anywhere else that ginger-soft horse will take us.

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We sleep in the same room when it's cold. The pink room is the only one with heat. On warmer nights, the family spreads through the house like lounging cats. Otherwise, my mother and her six children gather hungrily around the lone source of heat. Some share a big bed, others sleep on the floor.

I get a twin bed once, but lose it when I pee on purpose. I'm afraid of going to the outhouse alone, so I pee right on the bed, right through the Raggedy-Ann and Andy sheet set. The mattress has a plastic sheath whose protective powers intrigue me and which I convince myself I am testing, but mainly, I am afraid of the spiders that spin on silver strands along the outhouse path. Someone hears or smells, and I am found out. As punishment for my free-style peeing, the second-hand bed and its new mattresses—even the pee-stained sheets—are taken from me and given to my sister Stephanie. I get Steph's old sleeping bag after that. I cry hard about losing my bed, but am somehow comforted by my return to the floor.

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The house was once a stop for stage coaches. By the time we arrive, it is divided into two large apartments. People move in and out as though stage coaches still pull through—making stops, loading up, then pulling off again. Brothers, sisters, friends, and cousins step down from unseen coaches, stay a while, then pack up again, leave. Everyone is here and not here in a ghostly procession of comings and goings. Except men. There are no fathers or boyfriends in either apartment.

A young woman lives upstairs. If she has a husband, he has wronged her or someone like her brother has died. The scent of male tragedy clings to her. She paints her toenails red, wears ankle bracelets, and drives without shoes. My mother, who paints no part of her body, says barefoot driving is illegal.

The woman upstairs has several cats and gives me one of their offspring. The kitten is soft and white, so I name her something soft

and white. Snowball or Fluff. She is warm, I am cold—that is the basis of our love. My mother warns me about holding her, says the cat will die if I don't let her be, that I'll make her sick by carrying her around so much. But I'm crazy with desire for fluff and nuzzle my face into her fur every chance I get.

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One hundred toy soldiers wait in a plastic bucket under the big bed and later, under the bassinet. I arrange neat rows of dependable men fixed in permanent pea-green poses, set them in a variety of defending positions, have them advance in well-ordered lines. I feel most for the one who has just thrown a grenade. His right arm hangs in the air, fingers extended, face turned to one side, lips gnarled in horrid anticipation. Forever.

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Albion is in Orleans County, one of the poorest of all counties in New York State. And in the poorest of counties, the poorest of people come from West Virginia. Maybe they come to pull red fruit from freckled branches, or maybe they know something special about the place, some secret or well-disguised potential.

Mrs. Drake is a West Virginian. She lives upstairs before the woman who wears her sadness like perfume. A clutch of nappy gray hairs springs from her head so that she looks like a dandelion gone to seed. She is small as a girl, but her voice is worn as the yellow paper I help scrape from her walls. She re-papers the small kitchen with my mother's collection of newspapers from the day JFK was killed. My mother is shocked. She can't believe Mrs. Drake's mindless ways. My mother barely tolerates her, sees her as a bug of a woman. I am mystified. Nothing is off limits to Mrs. Drake, not someone else's belongings, not homemade wall-paper, not indelicate bits of personal advice. This is her main appeal.

"Listen up baby—if you ever get you an ear infection—jes' get yourself some sheep's urine and soak it up with cotton balls, then stuff the whole mess up into your ear—that'll clear things out in no time."

Mrs. Drake picks weeds and wild flowers from the field out back and boils them into home remedies. For Christmas, she gives each

of us four girls a smooth-handled wooden mirror. She serves hot tea and tells stories while teaching me to braid a long line of yarn with a stubby crochet hook.

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The backyard is the flattened acres of abandoned farms with a few clumps of trees left here and there. We build a fort in one of the tree stands, an oasis amid tall grasses and weeds. Whole days unwind here. We swing from homemade swings, chew on monkey vines, tell big stories about the land, saying that some child has died in the bottomless pond out back. We imagine quicksand in those places where no one goes but our bravest brother Johnny.

Johnny steals rides on Mr. Stragg's horses. Mr. Stragg owns the house and the land. He lives in a small ranch built to one side of the clapboard giant in which we live. His face is waxed red—a glistening turnip—and when they come, his words are mangled and choked, as though filtered through a wad of burlap in his throat. He's a farmer paid by the government not to farm. He is quietly kind, my mother tells me much later, and leaves groceries on our steps when he knows we have nothing. But in Albion, all I know is that Mr. Stragg is not to be pestered.

His wife is ill, her body curled into a wiry gray ball. When things get too quiet, she surprises everyone. She has a fit, unwinds herself, claws the clothing from her body, then runs wild and naked from her bed. She requires constant care. To add to Mr. Stragg's troubles, my brother John will not stay off the horses kept out back, horses which Mr. Stragg has clearly stated are not for riding.

Our mother begs Johnny not to and punishes him when he does, but the temptation to feel acres pounded underfoot, the soft power of the horse in his hands, proves too much for Johnny.

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For Christmas, Steph and I receive twin dolls. We are closest in age and always get different versions of the same thing. Same winter coat, different color. Same dress, different pattern. She has the George doll, I have Georgina. The dolls are three-feet tall with pink grins plastered on their faces. Red hair crowns milk-white skin

sprayed with freckles. Their fresh Gaelic features may charm some, but their green-eyed, button-nosed look is the one none of us has. As a result and in a sole attempt at unity, the sweet-faced pair repel us. Still, I don't hate Georgina the way that Steph hates George. She despises dolls altogether, is endlessly irritated by my mother's sloppy inattention to this detail.

"Oh Steph," my mother puffs out disclaimers like other mothers blow out silky loops of smoke, "I forgot about you and dolls."

Another Christmas and she'll meet Steph halfway, buy her a GI Joe. But there's no compromise in Albion, when Steph still hopes that every unwrapped gift is the erector set she'll never get. She can't shake the disappointment of getting a doll. Steph refuses to touch George at all until she beheads him that spring and hangs his ugly red head from the tree-house perch. I cry. I don't mourn the doll so much as grieve the loss of the pair. Georgina is nothing without George.

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The backyard fields are loaded with strawberries, which are eaten in bowls with milk. My mother makes jams and jellies. We grow vegetables in a muck garden near the house. Carrots, lettuce, and tomatoes mainly. We eat homegrown vegetables and fruits in season, and otherwise survive on the foods my mother cans. Homemade pickles, peaches poured into cobblers, strawberry preserves scooped onto warm biscuits.

My mother stores her peaches and beans in mason jars high up in a pantry that is otherwise bare. The pantry is a room of its own practically, with scalable shelves layered in enamel. The surface is soft from a century of springtime paintings, the shelves so giving my fingernails leave half-moon imprints on its skin as I climb.

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My mother works in a gypsum factory just outside of Batavia. The world outside passes from night to day and back again as she laces electrical wires through drywall boards. She is the only woman at work in the hollow metal rooms. She learns to drink coffee in the cold place with sawdust-laden floors. She has some days off and

I learn to fake sick at just the right time to gain trips to Carrol's for burgers, to the downtown diner for grilled cheese, to Ames for stiffly coordinated outfits stuck to plastic hangers. On those rare stolen days, I fill myself with green glass bottles of ginger-ale. I let the bubbles tickle my throat and gulp the soda meant to settle a stomach secretly at peace.

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On visits to the city, bad things happen. A stranger in a car invites me in, but I say no. Billy invites me to touch his thing, and I say yes to earn the red fire truck he promises and I later learn is not even his to give.

We are Catholic only when we return to the city and once at Sunday School, while coloring in Adam, Eve, and the Snake on black-outlined sheets, someone asks about Adam and Eve living outdoors and about how they went to the bathroom. I know how, so I raise my hand and tell the nuns about our outhouse. They don't believe. I insist, tell them about the black-eyed susans and buttercups that grow on the path to our outdoor bathroom. I leave out the spiders, make it sound pretty. The other kids laugh. The nuns bristle. When my mother arrives, they speak in hushes to her until she becomes red in the face. She was never so ashamed, she whispers not quite to me on the drive home. When we return to Albion, we find the house has been broken into and our allowances stolen. Only Steph's money, hidden in a rusted band-aid tin, is not taken.

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My grandmother visits in Albion. It's one of only four visits with her I'll ever have. She gives me a bracelet strung with bits of shell and metal. I have never owned anything so lovely. It's from somewhere warm, which I keep saying is Hawaii, though my mother corrects me that it is not. Probably it came from Florida. Or Vegas. My grandmother is not like other grandmothers. She moves from place to place and drinks whiskey like water. Besides the fact that my laughing mother becomes silent in her presence, I know only five things about my grandmother: 1) Her name is Anna Mae, first Chapman, then Barker, finally DeFrain; 2) She sewed the lace communion dress and matching veil for my sister Alicia by hand; 3) In

the city, she left eight wrapped gifts for our eight Michigan cousins without any for us, and when she left, my mother tore away the eight foreign names and gave the gifts to us; 4) She sprinkles salt on her apples and teaches me to do the same, which tastes bitter, but I pretend is the best thing ever, simply to earn her admiration, and; 5) She is a hard woman not given to fits of admiration.

I lose the bracelet on the bus the first time I wear it to school.

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We don't trick or treat on Halloween because the houses are so far from each other. Instead, our mother asks questions about past presidents or spins the globe and has us locate Istanbul or Uruguay. In exchange, we receive thick candy bars. She rigs the game to make sure everyone receives equal doses of chocolate.

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One frozen blue evening, we take rides on a horse-drawn sleigh. A man comes to the house and takes us by the loads full. Our laughter is the only sound for miles. I look up through the warmth of a scarf that covers everything but my eyes. The sky is blooming velvet flowers.

The man takes us back and forth along Route 31A, a few at a time. Those not in the sleigh clamor by the open door, our hot breath makes fog as we beg for another run.

Is the sleigh decked in bells? Are holly boughs tied to its side? Perhaps only the driver seems festive. He likes my mother. Or owes her something. The fun ends when his horses and sleigh fall into an icy ditch. My mother is harsh to him then. She shuts us up inside, leaves him out in the cold. He is drunk, she says, with rare judgment in her voice.

"Louise—Louise, Louise—I can get her up and running again—I can, I can."

Pound. Pound. Pounding on the door.

"Louise, Louise..." He calls after her, and from the frozen side of the door, joins with us at not wanting the fun to end. She stands there, silent and waiting. She will not look at us. She will not be swayed.

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Bob is the oldest in the family, the quiet one who lives with us some and with his father in Albany some. While in Albion, he works at the Swan Library. A monk from the library brings Bob to his house and stuffs him with sweets. We are intrigued by the old man and his fancy home and beg to visit when it's time to pick Bob up. My mother waits in the car or runs errands as we comb the red velvet cushions of antique chairs with our fingers.

The monk is as white as the sugar waffles he serves. He tells horrible stories while we gather at his feet. He talks and we eat bagfuls of caramels, dip our fingers into the powdered remains of delicate waffles. In his stories, girls are stalked and attacked, their heads cut away from their necks. The losing of heads should end things, but the monk doesn't stop there. He tells us that heads can always be reattached with well-placed scarves or a pearl choker necklace, and his story becomes girls trying to protect the remaining sanctity of their necks. They only lose their heads when they allow someone to remove their scarves. And no matter how smart or pretty, they're always conquered in the end. They forget their caution and allow some well-intentioned man to unclasp their necklaces. Heads tumble.

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My mother counts on me as her companion for the scary shows that only she and I like. Usually they are detective shows like *The Night Stalker* or low budget horror films involving some form of vegetation gone mad with desire for human blood. At times she draws a rather arbitrary line. She does this when *Rosemary's Baby* comes on tv. Despite my begging, my mother insists on watching Rosemary and her devil baby all alone. I have been wronged and cannot let go. I stay up, point my ears, and soak in the blurred sounds of poison malted shakes and satanic chanting from the other room. I fall asleep listening to Rosemary's screams.

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A bus takes us to Albion primary and middle schools. The driver is thick-featured and rarely moves from his cushioned perch, except on holidays, when he hands out treats from a plain brown bag—candy canes at Christmas, red wax lips on Halloween.

My oldest sister cries one day after leaving the bus. While the rest of us bawl as needed, Alicia is more stone than girl and until this moment, I have never seen her cry. As we watch for cars and cross the road from the bus to our house, I ask why. She walks away. Fast. Her face is hard. And wet.

“Why are you crying?”

“The kids were picking on us,” she says, and pushes away from me. I follow.

“Why would they pick on us?” I ask. Why? Why? Why?

“Why do you think?” She lashes out like a whip of salted ocean spit, “Our house is ugly, our clothes are shit—they hate us because we’re poor!” She lets it all out then, one angry sob, then runs into the house.

After Alicia’s crying, I no longer take the boxes. I lie, make excuses. A few times prior, I was sent home with boxes of donated clothes from a teacher in the primary school. I had been proud of my oversized loads, felt I had been entrusted with a special cargo.

I once opened one of those boxes. Before my sister cried, back when I still took them. During a slow ride on the school bus, I broke through tape and pushed my fingers into a small pot of solid perfume. I rubbed it on my wrist and felt pretty.

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At school, I learn to read and write and use spit in creative ways. I have a crush on a sweet-faced boy who looks like Randy of the Jackson Five. *Rhinestone Cowboy* is the big song. At school, I shine. Other than having a silver dollar given to me by the tooth fairy stolen from the coat closet, school is big and bright, a gem in my pocket. Everything is just right. Until Zaida.

Zaida is the only girl poorer than me, and in an effort to be more like them and less like her, I agree to help the other girls put a tack on her seat. I pretend-laugh as she lowers her trusting bony behind onto it. Days later, we drive out to her house. Sober rows of zucchini and eggplant line both sides of the shack whose paint has faded and run gray. My mother shocks me by not only knowing Zaida’s family, but by stopping to drop off something for them. The skinny girl with the apron dress and crane legs stands still as a giant bird in her dusty yard. She doesn’t look my way when my mother mentions our being

in the same grade. The air between us pulses, but no one else seems to notice. She flickers a bit, then fades, looks tired as the dirt at her feet. As we pull away, I feel some of Zaida's grit. Inside of me. Grit and shame and dust. It gets inside of me, and stays.

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Green shoots poke through the melting earth. Snowdrops, my mother says. She shares a secret. She's pregnant. She tells us this while lying on her side in tight blue jeans. She is all curves as she informs her assembled children that another is on the way. A baby! I think I'll float...but not so quickly. With her, you learn the foolishness of letting go even before cutting your first tooth. My mother is a raven, the trickster. She swells with promise, talks of milk and honey just beyond every bend, is as hard to hold as the tail end of a kite. Waves of thick hair the color of tamarack bark cover flirtatious eyes as she speaks. We'll have to give the baby away, she says.

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I hate Peg and Roland. They are strangers pretending to be friends because my mother is giving them the baby. Our baby, who is going to be half-Indian like Cher.

Stringy clumps of hair the color of strained carrots twine around Peg's thin neck. The chalky line of her lips recedes into a small chapped face. They want to show that they like kids and choose me to spend the day at their home. Their house smells of Pine-Sol and too much scrubbing. Lacy afghans of brown and orange drape the backs of plaid couches. On a trip to the store, they buy me a pack of barrettes—the kind clipped into the shiny heads of pretty girls at school. I snap a banana yellow one into my hair and take a nap clutching the prize of the others. I sleep near an open window and when I wake, the barrettes are gone. I run downstairs. My hands race back and forth under a hedge of prickly shrubs. Back and forth. Back and forth. My hands are rubbed raw by privet and holly.

The barrettes are not found and Peg is enraged. She thinks I've thrown them away. Her face snaps shut. Roland, who is little more than the red beard which masks his face, comforts her with a steady hand to the shoulder. They drive me home in silence. Peg tells my

mother about the barrettes. She heats up as she speaks, says how ungrateful I am. I run to my mother, turn to Peg, and scream that I hate her. When she does not flinch, I go further.

“And you’re never gonna get our baby!”

My mother digs into my skin with her hands, tells me to shut up. Peg hisses, then buries her head into Roland’s flannelled chest and cries.

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We keep her. My mother decides that Lynne will be her middle name, and allows us to vote on the first. Either Sarah or Amy. Sarah means princess, my mother says. I sense her nudging us toward Sarah, but I choose the name primarily on account of a girl named Amy in my class with a tiny row of rotted teeth.

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My cousin Judith cuts my hair off while my mother is at work. She needs practice cutting, and the shag is in style, she tells my mother later. My mother says nothing and yanks me and the other kids away. She takes us home and does not speak for hours. The razor cut is so short it stands up on top. She can not look at it. I must look as ragged as we are.

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The McCullens are not really our cousins, they remind us, they are my mother’s. We stay with them when we first leave the city. Most of us sleep in a large green tent in their yard until my mother finds the house in Albion. A few stay inside.

Aunt Jane is a Jehovah’s Witness who married one McCullen and had five girls, then married another, and had two more. Patti and Polly are the oldest. They are large-bottomed twins; a trail of suds perpetually falls from ripe hands, as the pair wash an endless pile of dishes. Linda is heart-faced, golden-haired, and in prison for being with a man who robbed a store and killed someone in the process. Judith is small and bitter. Tess is the dark and moody tyrant whose magic makes even old tree stumps shine with glamour and

intrigue. She doles out parts and leads us in daily re-enactments of *The Wizard of Oz*. Biz is the nickname for Isadora, who is my age and so agreeable she fades from every scene.

Tammi, the youngest, is the dark-haired favorite who begs to spend a night in Albion. She is a princess to us due to the fact that she's tiny as a doll and has access to a flush toilet. After helping to peel back corn and make dolls of their husks, she cries. She wants to go home. My mother returns her without complaint, but I hate the girl. I hate her still, am one of four long-haired girls dancing round her, corn puppet in hand, trying for the smile that just won't come.

As a bunch, the McCullens are wildly creative—energy unleashed. Aunt Jane sits at her electric sewing machine and whips off a stream of halter tops to outfit a yard full of sweaty girls. The stories they tell and retell, children listening from every corner of the room. But these cousins are also quick to anger and seem comfortably aware that their position is more solid than our own. Aunt Jane pressures my mother into beating us the time we try to make cement by peeing in the sand. I feel worse for my mother than for my own behind. She tends to laugh off things like pee-cement, but she's in charge of nothing at Aunt Jane's place. I hate my mother being stuck, the way she finally smacks our bottoms without heart, how even our punishment seems inadequate compared to the soulful whippings given by Aunt Jane to her clan.

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Judith babysits when my mother goes to the hospital to have the baby. My mother trips on a toy and falls. Her water breaks. The next day Judith walks around our house, barking orders, and reclining on my mother's big bed in the cool-weather bedroom.

Judith sits under the white chenille bedspread with the TV set planted squarely before her. When she notices me by her side, she says it's late and tells me to get to bed. I say that my mother always lets me watch *The Sonny & Cher Show*. She says no. When I do not move, Judith reminds me that my mother is not here. I remain by the side of the bed.

Judith is tired and mean, but I am pigheaded and right.

“I am allowed to watch Sonny & Cher,” I chant my right to stay up like the saying of a prayer until she can stand it no longer and calls my mother at the hospital.

My mother backs me up.

Judith does not let go of power easily. She swears under her breath and says that I am spoiled. She’s wrong. My mother spoils no one. Still, she gives me victory over Judith, and though I don’t want to be near my bitter second-cousin as she sprawls her scrawny body under my mother’s covers, I sit on the edge of the bed and make myself watch the entire show. I am tired, but sit there straight-backed until Sonny and Cher sing their closing song.

*I got you to hold my hand
I got you to understand
I got you to walk with me
I got you to talk with me
I got you to kiss goodnight
I got you to hold me tight
I got you, I won’t let go
I got you to love me so
Babe, I got you babe, I got you babe . . .*

The pair exchange wet glances with each other and with the viewing audience. Chastity joins her parents on-stage that night. Cher is jubilant at the arrival of her daughter; she beams as though the sun has been harnessed and brought before her. She sparkles and glows and squeezes the ordinary pink hand of her daughter. Cher gathers up her wide smile and blows America a kiss goodnight. Then she takes her baby into her arms and turns to leave—the beads of her glassy gown swirl about her feet as they walk off stage.

When all signs of Cher vanish, when she returns to the shimmer of her Hollywood life, I walk back to the big room and lay myself down to sleep. It’s dark, but the walls are stubborn, and I can still make out the pink. The hard broken pink. I stare into the plaster holes and wait.