

from *Just Call Me Al*

by *Benjamin Hollander*

1

Carlos and Ismail paused each time the natives spoke in the familiar, which in Amerika was each time they spoke. It was the natural order of their confidence. “Hi.” “How are you?” As if everyone understood the other to be well. A universalist narrative, to be sure, not to be doubted. “Fine.”

So it was not surprising and it was no big thing when, as teenagers, Carlos and Ismail, not wanting to be doubted and wanting for confidence, mistook this familiarity for something more meaningful, and so decided to mimic it: to make a home for the otherwise isolated names of persons and places they encountered, as if this was their American mission. To no one was each his own where each was a sign of the other, where what Carlos and Ismail heard in sequence was, well, alphabet aligned and crazy, starting with A, because it was in Amerika they found person and place and their relations in the world. “We are not a narrow tribe of men,” Uncle Hermann told them, “so take in the world as you play.”

2

Alley Pond Park

Asylum of Credemore

Allie Sherman

Alex Webster

Alex “I am of the six million”

Else’s predator Alex

Alice of the Jewish community

Person or place, they all came together one day, one year, as if they were family, on the Highway to the Asylum of Credemore, whose “retards,” that awkward American word known to be shameful yet said regardless, not only spooked the park thugs who would ridicule them but so too Ismail and Carlos and their friends, Gingi, Mordico, Berri, who called them this word as they confused this place with the more infamous because more televised Willowbrook State Hospital, where that year the city’s media lenses focused on the bruises of naked, wheelchair-spoked children who the cameras tracked crawling through the rain gutters and roaming in the basements deep in water and severed electrical wires strung out along the unswept floors.

No one knew how they got there, how they corresponded, but each person and place had in

Carlos's and Ismail's minds a room from which to enter and exit, as in the American Howard Johnson's, as they moved from one room to the other, *as if it were a scene made-up by the mind*, so that together these things were captured in a dream sequence reserved for creatures who had just arrived, the *arrivants*, Aliens in Amerika.

3

It was 1969 and from *Alley Pond Park*, at one moment, Ismail and Carlos tossed a pigskin under a row of elms and over the highway and then, in another moment, kicked it soccer style over another row of elms and over the same highway, so in the next room *Allie Sherman (came through)* resigned as coach of the Football Giants as his star running back, *Alex "Red" Webster*, took over, only to have the team collapse that season, while the children fell out of their wheelchairs and wept on the unswept floors, the pigskins floating in the winter spoon-drift across Ocean Highway and inside the Dark Courtyard of the Asylum of Credemore.

In still another room, a nurse wheeled out Ismail's Aunt Else, a refugee from Nazi-occupied Belgium now living in Florida, as she sat tubed and dying of lung cancer not so much in the Miami heat but fanned under the air conditioned vents in her apartment, where her big shot second husband *Alex*, *quickenning his mission with the Wall street spirit, with his reddened face* ate steak raw, smoked his Cubans, and stole money from her safe.

How many Evil Alex's like this could there be, Ismail thought, like the one in the next room, Ismail's "survivor" cousin *Alex*, "*Alex I am of the six million and you who are not a Light Unto the Nations should know it,*" so brother Gadi called him out, among the culture of Holocaust orphans, each one out-mistrusting the next, coming to the New Land, be it Israel or Amerika, it didn't matter.¹ To become one, Carlos's mother used to say, you had to act the real big shot, out-mistrusting the next one on the bread line (*hugging the earth for fear of being raptured and losing your place on the bread line*), the way, as Carlos' mother remembered, Evil *Alex* acted with Else before they married, telling her he owned a supermarket in Flatbush when it was a half a corner vegetable store on deserted, Polish Henry Street.

1 Carlos had heard Christian Patty's orphan theory explaining why Israeli Jews seemed to be always looking out for number one, watching their backs. But Carlos didn't believe it. If her theory was correct, he told her, and the Holocaust Jews who had arrived in the Land without their parents then bred children who inherited their push to the front of the bread line psyche, then it only figured that Muslims in Israel were compassionate, generous, merciful, and always watching the backs of others if, that is, they had inherited the traits of their Prophet Mohammed, a 6th-century orphan