

**Traitor**  
by M. Rickert

In the January 2008 issue of *Locus* magazine, M. Rickert remarked that “I’ve noticed that I’m getting a lot from the news, not so much [story] ideas as feelings. It’s almost like I can feel the characters and their emotions.”

Here she gives us a story that surely originated in just such a manner, a timely speculation about the near future.

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Alika with her braids of bells comes walking down the street, chewing bubble gum and singing, “Who I am I’ll always be, God bless you and God bless me, America, America, the land of the free!”

Rover says, “What’s that song you’re singing, Alika? That ain’t no song.”

Alika, only nine, ignores him the same way she’s seen her mama ignore the comments of men when she walks with her to the bus stop or the Quickmart.

“Hey! I’m talking to you!” Rover says.

But Alika just walks on by and Rover just watches her pass. The girl is only nine and he is nearly twelve. He shakes his head and looks down the street in the other direction. Besides which, she is crazy. Shit, he spits at the sidewalk. Damn! He can’t help it. He turns and watches her walking away, her braids jangling.

“America! America! Oh, I love America! My beautiful country, my own wonderful land, my homeland, America, loves me.”

Alika’s mom watches her and shakes her head. She drags her cigarette. Smoke swirls from her nostrils and mouth. Her fingers, with the long green painted nails, tremble.

Alika sees her sitting there on the stoop. “Hi, Mama!” she calls. The bells ring as she comes running down the walk. Running right toward her mama who sits there with smoke coming out of her ears and nose and mouth.

“Hey, baby,” Alika’s mother says. “Where you been?”

Alika stops in mid-running-step. Bells go brrring, brrring. She looks at her mama. Her mama looks at her. A truck passes. Fans and air-conditioners hum. Alika watches a bird fly into the branches of a tree, disappear into the green.

“Alika? Where you been honey?”

Alika shrugs. The bells jingle softly.

“Come here, child.”

Alika walks over to her mama.

“Sit down.” Her mama pats the step, right beside her.

Alika’s butt touches her mother’s hip. Alika’s mother smells like cigarettes and orchid shampoo. She brings a trembling hand to her lips. Drags on the cigarette, turns to face Alika. Alika thinks she is the luckiest girl in America to have a mama so beautiful.

“You don’t remember none of it?” she says.

Alika shakes her head. It always happens like this. Her mother puts an arm around her, pulls her tight. Alika’s bells ring with a burst. “Good,” her mama says. “Well, all right then. Good.”

They sit there until their butts get sore and then they go inside. Alika blinks against the dark and she hums as she runs up the stairs. Her mother follows behind, so slow that Alika has to wait for her at the door. While she waits, Alika hops from one foot to another. The bells make a quick ring, but Alika’s mother says, “Shush, Alika, what did I tell you about making noise out here?”

Alika stands still while her mother unlocks the door. When she opens it, fans whirl the heat at them. Alika’s mom says, “Shit.” She closes the door. Locks it. Chains it. Alika says, “Won’t do much good.”

Alika’s mother turns fast. “What?” she says with a sharp mean voice.

Alika shrugs. Brrring. She spins away from her mother, singing, “Oh, America, my lovely home, America for me. America! America! The bloody and the free!”

“Alika!” her mother says.

Alika stops in mid-spin. Bells go brrring brring ring tingle tap. She keeps her arms spread out and her feet apart, her eyes focused on the light switch on the wall.

“I’m going into the room,” Alika’s mother says.

Alika knows what that means.

“I’ll be out in a couple of hours. Your dinner is in the refrigerator. Nuke it for three minutes. And be careful when you take off the plastic wrap. Do you hear me Alika?”

Nod. (Brrring.)

“You’re a good girl, Alika. Don’t turn the TV too loud. Maybe we’ll go get ice cream.”

Alika’s mother goes into the room. Alika resumes spinning.

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The room is red, the color of resistance. It is stifling hot with all the shades pulled down. She’s considered an air-conditioner but it seems selfish when the money could be better spent elsewhere. The resistance isn’t about her being comfortable. She takes off her clothes and drops them to the floor. She walks across the room and flips on the radio. It cackles and whines as she flips through the noise. Damn station is always moving. It’s never where it was the day before. Finally she finds it. Music comes into the room and fills it up. She is filled with music and red. She walks over to stare at the wall of the dead. She looks at each photograph and says, “I remember.” They smile back at her in shades of black, white, and gray. Sometimes she is tempted to hurry through this part or just say a general “I remember” once to the entire wall. But she knows it isn’t her thinking this. Resistance begins in the mind. I remember. She looks at each face. She remembers. It is never easy.

When that’s finished she walks to the worktable. She sits down on the towel, folded across the chair. She looks at the small flag pasted on the wall there. The blue square filled with stars, the forbidden stripes of red and white. She nods. I remember. Then she flicks on the light and bends over her work.

Alika spins six more times until she is so dizzy, she spins to the chair

and plops down. When things fall back in order she looks at the closed door behind which her mother works. Red, Alika thinks and then quickly shakes her beaded braids to try not to think it again. Alika's mother doesn't know. Alika has been in the room. She's seen everything.

Hours later, after Alika has eaten the meatloaf and mashed potatoes and several peas; after the plate has been washed and dried and her milk poured down the drain, while she sits in the dim heat watching her favorite TV show, "This Is the Hour," her mother comes out of the room, that strange expression on her face, her skin glossy with sweat, and says, "Hey honey, wanna go for ice cream?"

Alika looks at her and thinks, Traitor. She nods her head. Vigorously. The bells ring but the word stays in her mind.

It's a hot evening, so everybody is out. "Hi, Alika!" they say. "Hi, Pauline." Alika and her mother smile and wave, walking down the street. When somebody whistles they both pretend they don't hear and when they pass J.J. who sits on his stoop braiding his own baby girl's hair and he says, "My, my, my," they just ignore him too. Finally they get to the Quickmart.

"What flavors you got today?" says Alika's mother. Sometimes, when Mariel is working, they stand around and talk but this is some new girl they've never seen before. She says, "Today's flavors are vanilla, chocolate, and ice cream."

Alika's mother says, "Oh."

Alika says, "What's she mean ice cream? Of course the ice cream is flavored ice cream."

But Alika's mother doesn't pay much attention to her. She looks right at the girl and says, "So soon?" The girl says, "She's already nine. She's going to start remembering." Then she looks at Alika and says, "What flavor you want?"

Alika says, "You said vanilla, chocolate, and ice cream."

The girl smiles. Her teeth are extraordinarily white. Alika stares at them. "Did I say that?" the girl says. "I don't know what I was thinking. Flavors today are Vanilla, Chocolate, and Hamburger."

"Hamburger?" Alika looks at her mother. This girl is nuts. But her

mother is standing there just staring into space with this weird look on her face. "I'll have chocolate," Alika says. "I always take chocolate."

The girl nods. "Those sure are pretty braids," she says as she scoops chocolate ice cream into a cone.

"I only get one scoop," says Alika.

"Well, today we're giving you three," says the girl with the brilliant white teeth.

Alika glances at her mother.

"Don't worry," the tooth girl says, "she already said it would be all right."

Alika doesn't remember that. She says, "I don't remember—"

But her mother interrupts her in that mean voice. "Oh Alika, you never remember anything. Take the ice cream. Just take it."

Alika looks at the girl. "That's not true," she says. "I remember some things."

The girl's eyes go wide.

Alika's mother grabs her by the wrist and pulls her, walking briskly out the door, Alika's bells ringing. "Mama," she says, "you forgot to pay that girl."

"It doesn't matter," Alika's mama says. "She's a friend of mine."

Alika turns but the girl no longer stands behind the counter. Some little kids run in and she can hear them shouting "Hey, anyone here?" Alika's mother lets go of her wrist but continues to walk briskly. Alika's bells ring. Her mama says, "You're more like me than anyone else."

Alika looks up at her beautiful mama and smiles.

But Alika's mama doesn't look at her. She stares straight ahead. She walks fast. Alika has to take little running steps to keep up. She can't hardly eat her ice cream. It drips over her fingers and wrist and down her arm. Alika licks her arm. "Mama," she says. Her mama doesn't pay her any mind. She just keeps walking, her legs like scissors, pwish pwish pwish. Her face

like rock. Alika thinks, scissors, paper, rock. Her mama is scissors and rock. That makes Alika paper. "Hey Mama," Alika says, "I'm paper." But her mother just keeps walking; pwish pwish pwish. Alika turns her wrist to lick her arm. The top two ice cream scoops fall to the sidewalk. "Shit," she says.

"What did you say?" the scissors stops and turns her rock face on Alika. "What did I just hear you say?"

"I'm sorry, Mama."

"You're sorry?" The rock stands there. Waiting for an answer.

"Yes, Mama," Alika says in a tiny, papery voice.

The rock grabs Alika by the wrist, the one that is not dripping and sticky.

"Pauline, that girl of yours giving you trouble?"

The rock turns to face the voice but does not let go of Alika's wrist. "This little thing? She couldn't give trouble to a fly."

The ice cream in Alika's other hand drips down her arm, the cone collapsing. Alika doesn't know what to do so she drops it to the side-walk.

The rock squeezes her wrist, "What did you do that for?"

"Ow, Mama," Alika says, "you're hurting me." Her bells clack against each other.

"Stop it, Alika," says the rock. "I mean it now. Stop your twisting around this instant."

Alika stops.

The rock bends down, face close to Alika's. "I don't want you arguing or crying about some stupid ice cream cone. Do you hear me?"

Alika can see that the rock is crying. She nods. Brrring. Brrring.

The rock lets go of Alika's wrist. Alika has to run to keep up, her bells ringing. "Hey, Pauline. Hey, Alika." Scissors, rock, and paper. Paper covers rock. Scissors get old and rusty. Alika spreads her arms wide. She runs

right past her mama. "Alika! Alika!" But she doesn't stop. She is a paper airplane now, or a paper bird. She can't stop. "Alika! Alika!" Her bells ring. "Alika!"

Her mother doesn't even scold her when she finds her waiting at the top of the stairs. She just says, "Time for bed now."

While Alika gets ready for bed Pauline goes into the red room. She takes the photographs down from the wall of the dead. She doesn't think about it. She just does it. She goes to the worktable, stares at it for a while, and sighs. She'll have to stay up late to finish. What's she been doing anyway? With her time?

"Mama? I'm ready for my story."

She sets the stack of the dead on the worktable.

"Mama?"

"I'm coming!" she hollers. She doesn't even bother turning off the light. She'll be back in here soon enough, up half the night, getting everything ready.

\* \* \* \*

*What I'm going to tell you about tonight is ice. From before. When there were winters and all that. When I was a little girl I snuck in my daddy's truck one night. He and my brother, Jagger, were going ice fishing the next morning. They said girls couldn't come along. So I decided to just sneak a ride. I lay there in the back of that truck all night. Let me tell you, it was cold. I had nothing but my clothes and a tarp to keep me warm. I know, you don't understand about cold. It was like being in the refrigerator, I guess. The freezer part, you know, 'cause that's where it's cold enough for ice. I lay there and looked at the stars. I tried to imagine a time like the one we live in right now. I tried to imagine being warm all over. I closed my eyes and pretended the sun was shining on my face. I guess it worked 'cause after a while I fell asleep.*

*I woke up when Daddy and Jagger came out the door and walked over to the truck. I could hear their footsteps coming across the snow. It sounded like when you eat your cereal. They put the cooler in the back but they didn't see me hid under the tarp. They didn't discover me until we got to the lake. My daddy was mad, let me tell you. Jagger was too.*

*But what were they going to do? Turn around? Daddy called my mama and told her what I did. I could hear her laughing. Jagger could hear her too. We stood there by the side of the frozen lake and stared at each other. You never had a brother. You don't know what it's like. Daddy hung up the phone, put it in his pocket, and said, "Your mama is very disappointed in you." Then he told me all the rules. How I had to be quiet and stay out of the way. He gave me two big nails to carry in my pocket. They were supposed to help me grab hold of the ice if I fell in.*

*The lake was all frozen and pearly white at the edges. You could see the lights shining in half a dozen little shanties. Mama had made red and white curtains for ours.*

*Walking across that ice, the sky lit with stars, the faint glow of lights and murmur of voices coming from the shanties, I felt like I was in a beautiful world. Even the cold felt good out there. It filled my lungs. I pictured them, red and shaped like a broken heart.*

*When we get into our shanty, my dad lifts the wooden lid off the floor and Jagger starts chipping through the ice there, which was not so thick, my daddy said, since they'd been coming regularly. And then they sat on the benches and my dad popped open a beer. Jagger drank a hot chocolate out of the thermos my mama had prepared for him. He didn't offer to share and I didn't ask. It smelled bad in there, a combination of chocolate, beer, wet wool, and fish. So I asked my dad if it was all right that I went outside. He said just don't bother the other folk and don't wander too far from the ice shanties.*

*I walked across the ice, listening to the sound of my footsteps, the faint murmur of voices. The cold stopped hurting. I looked at all the trees surrounding the lake, a lot of pine, but also some bare oak and birch. I looked up at the stars and thought how they were like fish in the frozen sky.*

*Anyhow, that's how I came to be practically across the lake when I heard the first shouts, and the next thing I know, ice shanties are tilting and everything is sinking. I hear this loud noise, and I look down. Right under me there is a crack, come all the way from where the ice shanties are sinking, to under my feet.*

*I finger the nails in my pocket though I am immediately doubtful that they will do me much good. At the same time, I start to step forward,*



*because, even though I'm just a kid, I want to help. But when I lean forward the crack gets deeper. When I lean back to my original position the ice cracks again. Men are shouting and I even hear my daddy, calling Jagger's name. But there are only islands of ice between me and the drowning men.*

*I am maybe a half-mile away from the opposite shore. The ice in that direction is fissured and cracked but appears to be basically intact, though even as I assess it, more fissures appear. What I have to do is walk away from my father and brother and all the drowning men. I was not stupid. I knew that it wouldn't take long for them to die, that it would take longer for me to walk across the ice. If I made it across. I would say that right at that moment, when I turned away from the men whose shouts were already growing weak, something inside of me turned into ice. It had to, don't you see? I decided to save the only person I could save, myself. I want you to understand, I never blamed myself for this decision. I don't regret it either.*

*So, I clutch the nails in my fist and step forward. The ice cracks into a radiated circle like those drawings you used to make of the sun. What else can I do? I lift my foot to take another step. Right then a crow screams. I look up. It's as though that bird is shouting at me to stop. I bring my foot back. Slowly. When I set it down again, I can hear my breath let out. That's when I notice that there is no sound. Just my breath. There is no more shouting. I picture them under the ice, frozen. I picture their faces and the nails falling from ice fingers. It almost makes me want to give up. But instead I take a careful step and just when I feel that ice under me, I exhale, slowly. I want you to understand. I know now and I knew then, that ice doesn't breathe. But it was like I was breathing with the ice. I took the next step fast, and right beneath me the fissure separated. I had to forget about the dead, I had to stop my heart from beating so hard. I had to make myself still. Then, carefully, I lifted my leg. Slowly. Breathing like ice. I breathed like ice, even when I started sweating, and I kept breathing like ice, even when the tears came to my eyes. I did this until I got to the shore on the other side. Only then did I turn around and start bawling. There's a time for emotions, right?*

*Trucks and cars were parked all along the opposite shore. I could see our red Ford. But no one was standing there. Mist was rising off the lake. I ran and walked halfway back before Mrs. Fando found me. She was driving out to scold her husband because he was late for work.*

*Folks treated me different after that. Everyone did. Everyone treated me the way Jagger used to, like I was too ugly to be alive or like I was some kind of a traitor. Even my own mother. Like I broke that ice under all those men and boys and murdered them myself. I tried to describe to them what happened and how I made it out by learning to breathe like ice but no one took me seriously. For a long time.*

*Then, when I was seventeen, this stranger came to town. People noticed her because she dressed so well, drove a nice car and was asking about me. She had this old torn newspaper article from way back and she said, "Is this you who survived that ice breakup?" I said yes it was. I thought she was maybe someone's girlfriend or grown daughter coming to tell me she wished I had died and her man had lived. Folks said stuff like that. But what she said was, "I think you need to come with us." She was a recruiter. For the new army. You heard about that, I'm sure.*

*Yep. That's what I want you to know about me, little girl. I never told you this before. I want you to understand what I do isn't for death. All those years ago I chose life, and I've been choosing it ever since. I have some special skills is all. I can walk like water, for instance; breathe like ice. I can build things. I have seen many people die and I still choose to stay alive. Those are qualities they look for in soldiers.*

*What I want you to understand is that all the time since then, I think I turned partly into ice. Until you came along. You came along and thawed me out, I guess. It's like that feeling I had, when I was walking out on the ice and I thought the world was a beautiful place. I have that feeling again with you. I couldn't love you more if you were my natural born daughter. Do you understand what I'm trying to say? I bet none of this makes any sense to you at all.*

Pauline leans down and kisses Alika's forehead. Alika rolls over, her bells go brrring. "Damn bells," says Pauline. She shuts off the light. Walks out of the room.

Alika opens her eyes. She sits up. Slowly. Alika knows how to move so carefully that the bells don't ring. Alika grabs the end of one of the braids. Slowly, she twists the bell off. It doesn't make a sound. What do they think? She's stupid or something?

She has to keep herself awake for a long time. Her mama is in the

forbidden room almost all night long. She keeps herself from falling asleep by remembering the pictures she saw on that wall. All those photographs of smiling children wearing backpacks. My sisters, Alika thinks.

It is already light out when she hears the forbidden door open and shut, her mother walking across the apartment to her own bedroom. When Alika leaves her room, she doesn't make a sound. The bells remain on her pillow. The first thing she notices is the smell of paint. The forbidden room is no longer red. It is white. All the pictures are gone. The worktable is folded up against the wall, beside the bookshelf. Alika can just barely see where the flag had been pasted. The paint there is a little rougher. But the flag is gone. Next to the door is her mama's suitcase, and a backpack and a camera. Alika opens up the backpack. Very carefully. She sighs at the wires. "Be one with the backpack," she says to herself. "Breathe like ice," she rolls her eyes.

By the time she leaves the room, it is bright out. She just gets the last bell in her hair when her mama comes in and says, "Get up now honey. Today is going to be a special day. I got you a new backpack."

Alika gets up. Her bells go brrring. She goes to the bathroom. She can just see the top of her eyes in the mirror over the sink. She changes into her yellow butterfly top and her white shorts. It's already hot. She eats a big bowl of cereal, sitting alone at the kitchen table. Her bells make little bursts of sound that accompany her chewing, which is like the sound of footsteps walking across snow her mama said. Sun pours through the white curtain on the window over the sink. After she brushes her teeth she stands in the kitchen and sings, "America, America, how I love you true. America, America the white stars and the blue."

"Okay, child. Come here now." Alika's mama stands in the forbidden room. The door is wide open. "Look what I have for you. A new backpack!"

Alika spins. Her bells go brrring, brrring, brrring.

"Alika! Alika!" Her mama says, "Stop spinning now."

Alika stops spinning.

"Let me put this on you."

Alika looks up at her mama, the most beautiful mother in the world. "There's something you should know about me," Alika says.

Alika's mama sighs. She keeps the backpack held out in front of her. "What is it, Alika?"

"I'm not stupid."

Alika's mama nods. "Of course you're not," she says. "You're my little girl, aren't you? Now come here and put this thing on."

After Alika's mama buckles the backpack on her, she locks it with a little key and puts the key into her own pocket.

"Don't I need that?" Alika says.

"No, you don't," her mama says. "Today we're doing things a little different. You get to keep this backpack. Not like the others that you had to drop off somewhere. This one is for you to keep. Your teacher will unlock it when you get to school. I gave her the extra key, okay? Now come over here. I want to take your picture."

\* \* \* \*

Alika follows the map her mother drew. "You have to take a different way to school today," she said. Her hands were shaking when she drew it. Alika follows the wavy lines, down Arlington Avenue past the drugstore and video place, turning right on Market Street. Alika's bells ring once or twice, but her step is slow. The backpack is heavy. She has to concentrate on these new directions.

"Hey, where you going?" Rover stands right in front of her. "Ain't you supposed to be at school?"

Alika shrugs. "I'm taking a different way."

Rover shakes his head. "Are you crazy, girl? This is no place for you. Don't you know you are heading right into a war zone?"

Alika smirks. "This is what my mama wants me to do."

"You better turn around right now," Rover says. "Less your mama wants you dead."

Alika doesn't mind turning around, because suddenly she remembers everything. She walks back home. She doesn't feel like singing. When she gets to their building she looks up and sees that the windows are all open,

even the windows in the forbidden room. She walks up the hot dark stairs. She gets there just as her mama is stepping into the hallway with her suitcase.

“Hi, Mama,” Alika says.

Alika’s mama turns, her face rock, liquid, rock. “What are you doing here?”

“I forgot to hug you good-bye,” Alika says.

Her mama steps back. Then, with swift precision, she steps forward as she reaches into her pocket, pulls out the little key, and unlocks Alika’s backpack. She runs across the apartment and throws the backpack out the window. Even before it hits the ground she is wrapped around Alika. They are crouched, in tight embrace. After a few seconds, she lets go.

“You all right, Mama?” Alika says.

She nods, slowly.

“I don’t know what to tell my teacher about my books. What should I tell her, Mama?”

Pauline gets up, walks across the apartment and leans out the window. Scattered on the ground below is the backpack, and several large books. She is shaking her head, trying to understand what has happened, when she sees Alika, with her belled braids, skipping down the steps, walking wide around the scattered contents of her backpack. Then, with a quick look up at the window, Alika breaks into a run, her bells ringing.

Pauline turns, fast. She looks at her suitcase in the hallway, runs to it, thinking (Alika?) she will toss it out the window, but she is not fast enough.

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All the dead children are reaching for her. She tries to exhale, but there is no breath. She sinks where she steps, grabbed by the tiny, bony fingers pulling her into the frozen depths. Rusty nails clutched in the ice children’s hands pierce her skin. How quiet it is, the white silence punctuated only by the distant sound of bells. Why, that’s Alika, she thinks, that’s my girl. Astonished. Proud. Angry.

Alika stands, gazing at the bombed building, feeling certain there is

something she has forgotten. An annoying fly, which has been circling her head, lands on her arm and Alika soundlessly slaps it, leaving a bright red mark on her skin, which she rubs until the burning stops. Then she turns and skips down the walk in this mysterious silent world, even her belled braids gone suddenly mute. An ambulance speeds past, the red light flashing, but making no sound, and Alika suddenly understands what has occurred. She has fallen into the frozen world. Surely her mother will come for her, surely her brave mother will risk everything to save her. Alika looks up at the white sky, reaches her arms to the white sun, bawling like a baby, waiting for her beautiful mother to come.