

# Alma Strikes a Chord



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# Contents

1. Write what you know	<i>1</i>
2. Not yet	<i>5</i>
3. An offer of help	<i>10</i>
4. Your sunshine is my moonbeam	<i>15</i>
5. The potential of our imagination	<i>21</i>
6. Bitter, bitter! Make it sweeter!	<i>26</i>
7. Fireworks that go bang, bang	<i>31</i>
8. And so we do	<i>37</i>
Appendix 1: Vocabulary	<i>43</i>
Appendix 2: Comprehension Questions	<i>48</i>
Appendix 3: Discussion Questions	<i>51</i>
Appendix 4: Activities	<i>55</i>



## Write what you know

Every teacher gives me the same advice: “Write what you know.”

But I don’t write stories. I’m a musician. I write songs.

Well ... I *try* to write songs, but I am afraid.

“Write what you know,” they say again and again.

But I don’t think I know very much yet. I’m young. I’m in a new country. And I’m learning a new language. What do I know?

“Write what you know—”

But—

Stop saying *But*— all the time! You’re just making excuses!

But—

Alma!

(Sometimes I talk to myself in my head.)

My name is Alma. I am 28 years old. I live in Portland now, but I was born in Guatemala. And for a while, my family lived in different villages in Mexico. We moved a lot, so I don't know much about any of those places.

I'm a baker. I make pies: fruit or cream; one crust or two; apple, banana, blueberry, chocolate, coconut, key lime, lemon-lime, peach, pumpkin, and strawberry. I can make pies, but I don't know much about bread or cookies or cakes. Not yet.

At the end of each long day, I hang up my apron stained by fruit. I wash my hands that are sticky from sugar. I grab an old, wooden ukulele, and I walk to a small coffee shop at the university on the other side of downtown. I sit in the corner by the big window. I sit in the corner on a wooden chair that does not match the plastic table. I sit in the corner, and I play songs on my old, wooden ukulele.

*Plink, plink, plink, plunk.*

By the way ... do you know what a ukulele is? It's a tiny little guitar with four strings. And it always seems a bit out of place—like me. I read about the ukulele online. I like to read about things online; I'm always curious about where things come from and how they move around the world. For example, you might think the ukulele is from Hawaii. It is, but it isn't, not originally.

Immigrants from Portugal first brought tiny guitars to Hawaii, and that's where they got their name. In the Hawaiian language, the word "ukulele" translates (sort of) as "jumping flea." Maybe it describes the



musician's fingers because they are always moving around .... just like me. Later, musicians brought the ukulele to the rest of the United States and the world.

*Plink, plink, plink, plunk.*

I sit in the corner, and I play songs on my old, wooden ukulele.

One song is about cats (of course). *I love my kitty cat. Yes, I do ....* When I play the song about cats, people pull out their phones and show me pictures of their cat. Sometimes someone shows me a picture of their dog, which I don't really understand. I mean, if a person sings about their love for their cat, why do you show them your dog? It doesn't make sense. That much I know.

That makes me think of the four strings on the ukulele. Each is a different note, or pitch. Musicians remember them with the sentence *My dog has fleas*.

Jumping fleas, dogs with fleas ... What is the connection between fleas and ukuleles? I wish I knew.

I wrote another song. It is about a sunny, warm day at a beach in Hawaii. It is the complete opposite of the weather in Portland most of the time. And it's the kind of song most people expect from a ukulele. *Aloha, Big Kahuna, aloha ....* When I play the song about Hawaii, most people put a dollar in my tip jar. They probably think I am planning a trip. But I am not. I don't really like the beach. There is too much wet sand at the beach. I lived on a beach in Mexico one summer, and, honestly, I'm still cleaning wet sand from between my toes.

What I want most is to write a song about falling in love. The prob-

lem is this: I don't know if I have ever been in love. How does it feel? I don't know what love is like, so I don't know what to write.

“Write what you know,” my teachers say.

OK. Here goes:

*I don't want to put down my phone—*

*—and be alone—*

[What rhymes with “alone”?]

*Plink, plink, plink, plunk.*

I can't. I don't know love. Not yet. Someday. Soon.

OK, to be honest, now I am blushing. I admit it! Oh,  
my gosh. If you could see my red face. Why am I  
blushing?

I blush because I am shy. My song makes no sense. And when I look  
up from my ukulele, there is Quang standing before me.

## Not yet

Quang. How do I describe Quang?

Most people say he is a weird artist. He is a painter. He paints invisible paintings. He paints invisible paintings of all the things people do not like about art in museums.

For example:

One day, a short, thin woman in a simple black dress with a soft, white scarf is talking to the middle of her very tall husband in the middle of the art museum in the middle of downtown. “Oh, Henry,” she says thinly. “I don’t like this one. I don’t like this one at all. There’s too much fruit! It makes me hungry!” Quang hears this. He rushes to his studio across the river and immediately creates five paintings. In the middle of each picture is a different piece of fruit.

I don’t tell Quang this, but when I look at Quang’s invisible paintings of fruit, I imagine they belong in a doctor’s office for children.

Here's another example from another museum in another part of town:

"Galina, my dear," says a cranky man with a crooked back shaped like a sideways letter W and a moustache almost as long as his two canes. "That painting is too red!" Back in his studio, Quang doesn't have much red paint, so this time he makes only one picture—a very small picture—but red as can be. It is still invisible, of course, but it is red—very red—very cherry, almost raspberry red.

Cherry or raspberry?! I want to ask because I can never remember which word is which fruit in English, but I've learned not to ask too many questions. I see what I see, and that's what it is, but I make a mental note to look online for more information about cherries and raspberries.

This is Quang.

Artist? Yes.

Weird? Maybe.

Boring? Never.

Quang and I have a friend who is a poet. His name is Stig. He is a dog and lives now in Paris, but that's not important. What is important is that Stig is a poet. He knows words. He writes about what he knows. And he knows Quang. And when he writes about the unusual things that Quang does, Stig always asks the readers, "Is that weird? Or is that wonderful?"

I think that it's wonderful. I think Quang is wonderful. He has the ability to take an idea that is very complicated and make it simple.

“His sense of clarity is almost clairvoyant,” says Stig, playing with the similar sounds of the words. But it’s true. The world is confusing, but Quang makes sense. He sees what others cannot see.

To be truthful, Quang and I are dating. In fact, we have been dating for 10 years. We met right here at this coffee shop. He was hanging his paintings for his first art show. They were, believe it or not, paintings of pies: fruit or cream; one crust or two; apple, banana, blueberry, chocolate, coconut, key lime, lemon-lime, peach, pumpkin, and strawberry.

When I think about it, I guess our meeting was a clear coincidence. Or was it destiny?

There was a party on the first night of Quang’s art show. I brought small, individual pies from the bakery where I worked, and Mel, the owner of the coffeeshop, passed around drinks. But instead of tiny cups of espresso, Mel poured very tall glasses of champagne—you know, the wine with tiny bubbles. Stig read a funny poem that he wrote about Quang. And Stig’s upstairs neighbor Lorena tap-danced ... loudly—while Stig’s cousin Abdi played the drums ... loudly.

Again ... Is that weird? Or is that wonderful?

Quang saw my ukulele, and he asked me to play. This was before I started writing my own songs. In fact, I didn’t know many songs at all. My lips pinched, my nose scrunched, and my eyes squinted. I took another sip of the champagne and smiled. I knew the perfect song!

*Plink, plink, plink, plunk!*

That was just me getting ready: “My dog has fleas!” Stig (a dog) gave me the side-eye.

*Plink, plink, plink, plunk!*

I took a deep breath. I looked at Quang. I smiled. I played my ukulele and sang:

*Tiny bubbles*

*In the wine*

*Make me happy ,*

*Make me feel fine .*

*Tiny bubbles*

*Make me warm all over*

*With a feeling that I'm gonna*

*Love you till the end of time.*

Quang smiled. Stig closed his eyes. I think that he was happy that I was, at least, in tune. Mel started to sing along with me. He knew the song. It was very popular when he was younger. We sang together. Everyone laughed.

Later Quang asked me, “Do you know who wrote that song?”

“Ho wrote that song,” I said.

“That’s what I want to know. Who wrote that song?”

“Do you know Don Ho?”

“Don who?”

“No, not Don Who. Don Ho. “

“Who now?”

“Ho. Ho! HO!”

“Ha!”

“What?”

“Now you sound like Santa Claus!”

Indeed, “Ho, ho, ho!” is what Santa Claus says. I don’t know much about American holidays, but that much I had learned very quickly. Unfortunately, I didn’t learn until much later that Leon Pober wrote that song, not Don Ho.

“Do *you* write songs, too?” he asked me.

I nodded and smiled again, even though it wasn’t true (well, not yet).

“How do you know what to write about?” he asked me.

Again I pinched my lips. I scrunched my nose. I squinted my eyes.

Quang raised an eyebrow. I learned quickly that he does this often when he is curious.

“I follow the advice of my teachers: I write what I know.”

Fast forward to today, and Quang and I have been dating for 10 years now. During that time, I have written a song about cats. I have written a song about a sunny, warm day at a beach in Hawaii. But I have not written a song about Quang.

Not yet.

## An offer of help

“Hello, Alma.”

“Hello, Quang.”

Quang sits down next to me in the coffeeshop. Francisco is with him. Francisco is our friend. I am surprised to see Francisco because he usually works at night. He is an architect, so that is a little strange. Even more strange is that he dreams of buildings that are upside down. Or are they inside out? Maybe both, but I have never heard of an architect who works at night.

During the day, Francisco plays music in a park not far from here. That's his “slash”: architect/musician. My slash is baker/songwriter. Quang's slash is painter/ ... Many people in Portland have a “slash” ... except Quang.

Francisco inspires me. He is an amazing musician. He can play many different instruments—sometimes more than one at a time!



I offer Francisco my ukulele. I want him to play something. He waves it off and pulls a harmonica out of his pocket.

Do you know what a harmonica is? Another name for it is a “mouth organ” which, in my opinion, is not nearly as pleasing as “harmonica.” I think that’s because I see the word “harmony” inside the word “harmonica.”

A harmonica is a small musical instrument. You play it by holding it to your mouth. You blow and suck air through the instrument. You can move it from side to side between your lips in order to change the notes.

Francisco winks at me. I smile. I look at Quang. He nods. We begin. I start with a few chords on my ukulele. Then Francisco provides some melody on his harmonica, except that he likes to improvise. That means that he adds or changes notes here and there instead of following the music exactly.

It’s easy to improvise on a harmonica. Each note already has overtones and undertones. I mean, that’s the definition of the word “harmony”—“different musical notes that are sung or played at the same time, making a pleasant sound.” A ukulele, on the other hand, can play more than one note together, but it’s different. They are never at the same exact time. One string always makes a sound a little before the next. Furthermore, a musician can slide from note to note on a harmonica; they can sound connected. On a ukulele, the notes are more independent, like two people who are dating, but not married.

Francisco finishes the improvisation, and then Quang joins us. We are playing a popular song from the 1970s, so several people in the coffee shop recognize it. The song was written by a man named Bill Withers. Quang sings the chorus of the song softly:

*Lean on me*

*When you're not strong,*

*And I'll be your friend.*

*I'll help you carry on*

*For it won't be long*

*Till I'm gonna need somebody to lean on.*

To make the point, Quang leans on me, and I hold him up.

Then we get to the part of the song where the musical instruments stop. We all clap in rhythm instead. A handsome young man from another table stands up and sings *a capella*, which means without instruments:

*You just call on me, brother, when you need a hand.*

*We all need somebody to lean on.*

*I just might have a problem that you'll understand.*

*We all need somebody to lean on.*

The four of us finish the song together, and we learn later that this man's name is Onry. He has an amazing voice. He is an opera singer. I recognize him from the television. He was on the news. He has the longest scarf that I have ever seen. He was walking in the park near the university and heard one of the students practicing the national anthem for the upcoming university graduation ceremony. So he asked if he could join her, and they sang the

anthem together. A few months later, they recorded a Christmas song together in beautiful harmony.

Harmony is such a peculiar thing, isn't it? Although each person sings a different note, they sound good together when it's the right notes. People can even have different notes at different times that work well together if the rhythm is right. And then think of all the different instruments that make a band or orchestra ... Music blows my mind.

Onry says hello and goodbye in one breath. Quang gets up to buy him a cup of coffee on the way out.

"That Quang is a nice guy," observes Francisco.

"Yes," I say. "Quang is a nice guy."

"You two have been dating a long time."

"10 years," I add while tightening the strings of my ukulele from *plunk* to *plink*.

"He must love you very much."

I stop. My lips pinch. My nose scrunches. My eyes squint. Francisco notices my odd expression.

"What is it?" he asks.

I'm not sure I should say anything.

"Well?" he adds.

“I want to write a song for Quang. I want the song to show how much I love him.”

“That’s a great idea!” says Francisco.

“But I don’t know how to do that,” I say.

“What do you mean? You wrote songs before. Use your ukulele. Or here, try my harmonica.”

“No, I mean, I don’t know how to write a song about love. I don’t know if I am even in love because I don’t think I know what love is.”

As soon as I say those words, I immediately regret it. There are so many songs that use those exact same words. And Francisco is the type of person who starts singing suddenly, without stopping to think about it. Music is his life.

But Francisco remains quiet. He is thinking.

And that worries me.

Quang looks at me from across the coffee shop and smiles.

I raise my ukulele and pluck its four strings one at a time. I mouth the words: *My dog has fleas*.

Francisco rolls his eyes, leans over, and whispers in my ear: “Let me help you.”

## Your sunshine is my moonbeam

It's Thursday. It's my favorite day of the week. Why is Thursday my favorite day of the week? I think it is because, as a child, Thursday was always "art day" in school. I attended a small school, and we had art class one day a week—Thursday. And that made Thursday a special day.

But wait, I say to myself ....

You see, I am walking down the street, thinking.  
And sometimes thinking is the most distracting thing  
in the world.

I remember how special Thursday is—because of art—and I suddenly stop walking. I turn my head a little. And I ask myself: Why did we make art on only one day each week? Why not every day of the week? Why not make art about stories we read? Or the math problems we solve? Or even the pies that we bake?

At that moment, a child bumps into me. He, too, is lost in thought.

As I said before, sometimes thinking is the most distracting thing in the world.

His eyes are open, but he isn't looking where he is going. Then BUMP! right in the behind.

"Sorry!" he says without looking.

"Don't worry!" I say. "It's Thursday!"

He doesn't understand. I don't blame him. I don't blame him for bumping into my behind. I'm almost old enough to be his mother, and I don't understand a lot of things either. At least not yet.

*Not yet.* I love that phrase. There is so much potential in that phrase *not yet*.

At the next intersection, the boy continues across the street—

I will probably never see that boy again. Isn't that a strange thing? Isn't it odd how some people cross paths, but never connect? Meanwhile, we make other connections that have a strong impact on our lives, like the day I met Quang in the coffee shop. That day changed my life forever.

I turn the corner, and I arrive at Francisco's home.

"So do you have any ideas for your love song for Quang?" he asks me.

"Not yet," I reply as I pull my ukulele from its case.

*Not yet.* How delicious those words are in my mouth.

“Where do we start?” I ask.

“Coffee,” says Francisco.

An hour later, Francisco finally puts down his coffee cup and asks me, “So do you have any ideas for your love song for Quang?”

Just as I open my mouth to speak, Francisco’s phone rings. It is his wife, Maria. She is in Honduras. They talk on the phone every day, but they have not seen each other in 10 years.

10 years is a long time. I know.

Francisco came to the United States only a short time after they were married. He came for work. He sends money back to Honduras for his wife and his son. Francisco has not seen his son. His son was born after he left Honduras. His son is now 10 years old.

10 years is a long time. A person can change a lot in 10 years. I wonder how I have changed since meeting Quang.

I know how important this call is for Francisco. So I smile and wave my hand to indicate that I will wait outside. I take my ukulele, and I sit outside on the steps to his apartment building. As I play those four special notes (*My dog has fleas*), the boy who bumped me in the behind walks past. I stop. My lips pinch. My nose scrunches. My eyes squint.

How weird! I never thought I would see that boy again. Now here he is!

This time the boy looks at me. I smile and say, “Don’t worry! It’s Thursday!” He rolls his eyes and walks down the street. I laugh.

How many times have I said “I never thought I would ...” but then I did? The point is, I think, that we can surprise ourselves. We do things that we don’t think we can do. Things happen that we never expect.

“10 years is a long time,” says Francisco, as he sits down next to me.

“You must love her very much,” I say.

“I would do anything for her, but I never thought I would be apart from her for this long.”

Francisco and Maria have been apart for 10 years, but he knows he loves her. Quang and I have been together for 10 years, and I know I love him. So why is it so difficult to write a song for him?

“Tío Francisco!”

“Tío” means “uncle” in Spanish.

The boy speaks to Francisco in Spanish, which I understand, and then he runs off to the playground in the park across the street.

“Was that boy your nephew?” I ask Francisco.

“No,” replies Francisco. “But I love him just the same.”

“Why?”

“His father is not here. My son is not here. But he and I are here, and we make a good team. Just like you and Quang! Now let’s talk about this song that you want to write.”

Several hours later, Francisco yells “Fin!”



“Fin” means “the end.”

He is very excited. However, I don't feel the same way. My lips are still pinched, my nose is still scrunched, and my eyes are still squinted.

Something is wrong.

“Let's take it from the top.”

“From the top” means from the beginning. I know this because we are both musicians. We speak the same language.

Francisco has brought out his old violin. It's like the ukulele's fancy grandparent. He gives me the piece of paper with the lyrics, which are the words to the song. He closes his eyes. He begins playing notes that are long and graceful. He is emotional. The romantic music flows like heavy water.

Then he suddenly stops and opens his eyes, as if he awoke from a dream.

“What?” I say.

“Why are you not singing the song, Alma?” he asks.

“Uh—”

“Again. From the top.”

The long and graceful notes swirl around me. They are beautiful, but—

“But what?” says Francisco interrupting my distracting thoughts.

He takes the piece of paper from me. He clears his throat and sings with much love and more than a little sadness:

*You are my sunrise and my sunset.*

*Every day is a beautiful dream.*

*Every night is another wonderful memory—and yet—*

*Your sunshine is my moonbeam.*

“Francisco,” I say quietly and with great respect. “This is not *my* song. This is *your* song.”

## The potential of our imagination

A few days later, I visit the only other musician I know, and I immediately get an earful.

“Your accent is too strong.”

“My accent is too strong?”

“I cannot always understand you, Alma.”

“Maybe *your* accent is too strong, Abdi!”

We have this conversation a lot. My friend Abdi and I are from different countries. In fact, most of my friends are from different countries. Our first languages are different, so we speak in English. English is everyone’s second language. And so everyone has an accent.

Actually, even native speakers of English have accents. I don’t always hear it. However, my friends who grew up in Portland often know when someone

is from, for example, New York or Texas or California.

“It doesn’t matter,” I add. “When I sing, I don’t have an accent.”

This is sort of true ... and sort of not true. Some words still get me into trouble. Words are like that; sometimes they are difficult to control.

I am visiting Abdi for help with my song for Quang. He is another musician. He plays the drums ... loudly.

That makes me wonder: Maybe Abdi doesn’t hear very well. Maybe that is why he thinks my accent is too strong. Maybe that is why he doesn’t always understand me.

Abdi spins his wheelchair and calls to his husband who is in the kitchen of their apartment. Abdi and Ahmed have been married for three years (not a long time). Abdi still asks Ahmed for his opinion all the time.

“What do you think, Ahmed?” asks Abdi.

Ahmed enters with fresh coffee and a plate of dates. The coffee smells wonderful; it has a hint of cardamom. The dates are sweet and slightly sticky. They always serve me coffee and dates when I visit, so I visit often.

“Accents are beautiful,” says Ahmed. “When a person speaks English with an accent, it just means that they know more than one language.”

We drink coffee. We eat dates. We laugh at each other’s accents.

We talk about the song that I want to write for Quang since his first language is Vietnamese.

“So,” asks Ahmed, pausing for dramatic effect, “Quang is from Vietnam. He speaks Vietnamese. How do you say ‘I love you’ in Vietnamese?”

That’s a good question. It’s one thing to simply translate the words, but it’s another to know when and how to use them. In English, we can say “I love...” for romantic love, but also love for things like sweet and sticky dates or coffee with cardamom. What if Vietnamese is different?

“What if Vietnamese is different?” I repeat out loud. “What if—”

Do you remember earlier when I confessed how much I like the phrase *not yet*? Well, *what if* is another phrase that I adore. It is another phrase that holds so much potential! It forces the imagination to go places that a simple prediction never would go. “What if I won a million dollars?” “What if I had never met Quang at the coffee shop?” “What if my song for Quang isn’t good enough?”

My lips are pinched, my nose is scrunched, and my eyes are squinted. My thinking is distracting me. I don’t even notice that I have filled my mouth with a second date before chewing the first one. I realize this only after Abdi makes a big finish to a silent, imaginary drum solo that Ahmed clearly thinks has gone on too long.

I try to say something, but my mouth is full of dates. All that comes out is “Whuhshehuhdh?”

“I cannot always understand you, Alma,” Abdi says again, with a smile.

I chew the dates as fast as I can while still being polite. I look back and forth, from Abdi to Ahmed. I breathe faster. My mind moves from one idea to the next very quickly. All the time, I am thinking: What if I choose the wrong words in Vietnamese? What if I use English, but he doesn’t think I am serious? My thoughts are racing. Everything is mixing. “What if—” and “Not yet” and “Whuhshehuhdh?”

I swallow, and I begin to say—

“Ahmed,” says Abdi, quietly, as he spins his wheelchair to face the door to the next room.

I stop with my mouth open. Ahmed smiles at me. I smile back.

“Hold that thought, Alma,” says Ahmed as he follows Abdi out of the living room.

I am immediately concerned.

Last year, Abdi had a car accident. Now he is in a wheelchair. Sometimes he needs help. His husband Ahmed is there to help him. Sometimes Abdi needs help with personal things—the things that nobody talks about because they are private, like getting dressed or going to the bathroom.

I never say anything during those times because there is nothing to say. They love each other, and they understand what each other

needs. How do I know they love each other? It's not what they say; it's what they do. That's how they communicate their love.

Now I am thinking that maybe I should leave.

Then, all of a sudden, Ahmed pushes Abdi through the doorway and they circle around the couch. Abdi is now dressed as a drum major in Portland's big Rose Festival Parade. His red and white uniform sparkles, and he is wearing some really cool sunglasses. His helmet has a giant red rose, which is a special flower in Portland. He's wearing white gloves and red shoes. A special set of red and white drums is attached to his wheelchair.

Abdi begins to play the drums ... loudly.

Ahmed pushes the wheelchair around the couch again, marching in step with the drums. It sounds like a whole parade is in the apartment. I laugh. I clap. And when they stop in front of me, Ahmed blows a whistle, and Abdi throws red and white confetti in the air.

That confetti will not be easy to clean up, I think to myself.

Abdi has an enormous smile on his face. He holds up his drumsticks and says, "What if—"

"Abdi," I say quietly and with great respect. "This is not *my* song. This is *your* song."

## Bitter, bitter! Make it sweeter!

It's Friday, and the flour is flying.

I am at work, but I am not making pies today. The bakery is busy with orders for an unusual number of wedding cakes. So instead of baking with the berries, I'm cooking with the cousins — the Ukrainian cake cousins: Diana, Darina, Marta, Maria, Veronika, Victoria, Yana, and Yeva.

“Alma! Flour!”

I don't understand much more than that, but that is enough. They need more flour. So I get more flour. The flour comes in a big bag. It is heavy. So I wrap my arms around its middle. I give it a big squeeze like I'm giving it a bear hug. It's a lot of flour, but the cake cousins need a lot of flour. They have many wedding cakes to bake.

I wonder why there are so many weddings this weekend. I start to imagine one of the weddings. I start to picture in my mind the party. I can see the



people. I can taste the cake. I can hear the music  
which makes me want to dance.

I am a graceful dancer—much better than my partner, the bag of  
flour. I hold tight and start spinning and spinning until I close my  
eyes so I don't get dizzy and—

“Alma!”

The loud voice startles me. When I stop and open my eyes, the bag  
of flour slips through my arms and drops to the floor. It lands on my  
foot, which makes me twist my ankle and fall down.

Ouch!

Diana and Darina gasp, drop their spatulas, and rush to my side and  
help me up again.

Marta and Maria let go of their rolling pins, wipe their hands, and  
together drag the bag of flour to the table.

Veronika and Victoria each bring me a chair. At first, I don't know  
what to do. Then I sit in one chair, and I put my foot up on the  
other chair.

Yana and Yeva laugh. They join hands and start dancing. The oth-  
ers start singing a Ukrainian wedding march. Yana and Yeva whirl  
around the bakery as if it were a ballroom in a grand hotel. It takes  
my breath away. Soon everyone circles around us, and they throw  
flour in the air like rice at a wedding.

I don't always understand what the Ukrainian cake  
cousins say, but I see what they do, and it fills me  
with ... love.

My lips are pinched, my nose is scrunched, and my eyes are squinted.

I am lost in my thoughts again. I am distracted by my thinking. But this is important. So I repeat it to myself: I don't always understand what the Ukrainian cake cousins say, but I see what they do, and it fills me with love.

As if it were planned, bells begin ringing. However, they are not wedding bells. They are the oven timers. The first cakes are baked and ready to come out of the oven.

The cake cousins laugh and return to work. I try to get up from the chair, but it's not easy. My foot is fine. But it takes me a little longer to stand and walk to my table.

Darina sees this and says, "You stand up last."

Diana smiles and concludes, "Not good."

"Not good? Why?" I ask.

Maria says, "Tradition."

"Stand up last, get married last," explains Marta.

I laugh.

"Jump up or sit alone for the rest of your life," says Veronika, who is not smiling. I guess she believes this tradition is true. I don't think she is married, so maybe this happened to her in the past.

"That's just a wedding party game," I say.

Just then, Victoria whispers in my ear: "10 years."

Victoria is my favorite cousin. So I whisper back, “She sounds bitter.”

Although I whisper, Yana and Yeva overhear my comment. They look at each other for only a moment before chanting together “*Hirko! Hirko!*”

*Hirko?* What’s *hirko*?

I look at Victoria. She smiles and explains. She says, *Hirko* means “bitter.” And it’s part of another Ukrainian wedding party tradition. People shout “*Hirko! Hirko*” and then the bride and groom must kiss. The tradition says that if something is bitter, then kissing will sweeten it.

Veronika looks around the bakery and then looks directly at me. She says, very plainly, “All bride, no groom.”

Ouch! Now *that* hurts more than a bag of flour on my ankle!

Nobody pays attention to her until more bells ring. This time, the sound comes from the little bells on the front door. We have a visitor. It is Quang.

Quang! I’m blushing. I can feel it. My cheeks are warm and must be raspberry red.

The Ukrainian cake cousins—all eight of them—pull Quang into the room and toward me. They circle us like an inside-out octopus. Yana and Yeva have started clapping and singing:

*We won’t drink vodka;  
it is very bitter.*

*Let the bride and groom  
make it a little sweeter.*

*Bitter, bitter,  
make it sweeter!*

*Bitter, bitter,  
make it sweeter!*

Diana and Darina wave their hands to get us to face each other. Marta and Maria kiss the air again and again. Veronika and Victoria chant “*Hirko!!*” while Yana and Yeva clap their hands. Quang laughs and laughs ... but he does not kiss me. So I take his face in my hands, and I kiss him.

Quang is very confused, but now he is also very amused.

The oven bells ring again. The cousins cheer and clap and slap each other's back. The fun is over; it is time to go back to work. And as I cut a piece of extra wedding cake for Quang, Victoria whispers in my ear. “This is the kind of song you need to write for Quang.”

“Victoria,” I say quietly and with great respect. “This is not *my* song. This is *your* song.”

## Fireworks that go bang, bang

Quang has a brown paper bag. Inside the bag is lunch from my favorite food cart. He always knows exactly what to order: a #3 sandwich with extra pickles on the side. And he always gets a #3 sandwich, too, and gives me his extra pickles.

I could eat pickles for days.

I grab my coat and bag, and we go to the roof of the bakery. There is a picnic table here for the staff to take a break and get fresh air. The weather today is cool, but pleasant. Usually the air smells a lot like fresh bread, but it's still good to be outside. We finish eating, and while Quang prefers sitting on the side of the picnic table with shade, I enjoy the sunshine on my face.

"Play me a song," says Quang out of the blue.

I freeze. I can't move. I can't even breathe. Why does he want me to play him a song?

"You have your ukulele in your bag, don't you?" he asks.

I can't lie. I always have my ukulele in my bag. That's why I play a ukulele. It's small. I can carry it in my bag everywhere I go. So, yes, I have my ukulele in my bag right now.

Still, I say nothing.

Does he know that I have been trying to write a song for him? Or am I just acting weird?

"So play me a song."

He must know. And now he wants me to play the song I wrote. But I haven't written anything!

"Here," says Quang, as he hands me the ukulele from my bag. "Show me the jumping fleas!"

I try to smile. I try to look him in the eye, but even now, after 10 years, I sometimes feel so shy. I sometimes feel very nervous. I sometimes feel very vulnerable.

I want to write a song for Quang. I want to write a song that says in music all the things I cannot say with words alone. I want to create something just for him.

My mind jumps back in time. The weather makes me think of Francisco's sunshine. My racing heart reminds me of Abdi's drumbeat. And when I overhear Veronika's laughter from the bakery downstairs, I instantly jump to my feet so that I do not break tradition. Each of these things reminds me of my wish, my goal, my dream—and my failure.

Quang looks at me from across the table and smiles.

So I try. I try to make music. I try to play the perfect notes. I try to sing the perfect words. I want to show Quang 10 years of love through the four strings of my ukulele. But all that comes out is three *plinks* and a *plunk*:

*My.*

*Dog.*

*Has.*

*Fleas.*

I am so embarrassed. I am horrified. I am mortified. What did I do? Quang was surely expecting something special—sunshine and moonbeams, a marching band with red and white confetti, or a Ukrainian wedding where a simple kiss can turn something bitter into something sweet.

I close my eyes because I cannot even look at Quang right now. And then I hear what sounds like an echo:

*Your.*

*Dog.*

*Has.*

*Fleas.*

Quang continues to improvise:

*But it ain't no real disease ....*

*Wiggle those toes and scratch these knees.*

*Your dog has fleas.*

I open my eyes. Quang blinks his eyes at me. He wants me to continue. And so I do.

*Plink, plink, plink, plunk!*

I start to sing:

*My dog—*

Quang interrupts, raising his hands as if he is performing on stage of a theater.

*Your dog—*

We start to sing together.

*Our dog has fleas!*

*But it ain't no real disease ...*

My turn:

*Give him a hug, give him a squeeze—*

Quang's turn:

*Just don't give him any more fleas!*

We finish this part together:

*Give him a hug, give him a squeeze!*

*Just don't give him any more fleas!*

I can't believe what is happening. We have never done this before. Quang and I are making music together. We are harmonizing! And it's a song about dogs and fleas! Ha!



I strum a little bit and then change keys. That means all the notes of the melody are now one step higher. Changing keys is something musicians do to add energy to a song. It gives the song momentum, which means that it keeps it moving forward, like reaching the top of a hill and now, all of a sudden, you're rolling down the other side. It's the same hill, but you're moving faster and it feels even more exciting.

*My dog has fleas—*

*Your dog has fleas—*

*Our dog has fleas,*

*But it ain't no real disease.*

*I don't have any expertise—*

*—but you can act as you please—*

*I don't have any expertise—*

*But my dog—*

*—your dog—*

*—our dog—*

*—has fleas!*

I'm not sure what Quang thinks, so I stop on a funny note.

We are just making this up as we go, after all! Songs like this often follow a familiar pattern. But that's one more thing I love about Quang: He can see what's not yet there. That must be why he paints invisible paintings. But today, I want to show him what I see. I want him to see what is already there. So I ask myself, "What if I changed the words?"

*Plink, plink, plink, plunk!*

*I love you, Quang.*

*We are the yin and the yang.*

*Together we are fireworks that go bang, bang.*

*We are a sweet wedding toast and a noisy drumline.*

*We are midnight moonbeams and daytime sunshine.*

*You're my lemon pie, and I'm your fluffy meringue—*

*Plink, plink, plink, plunk!*

*I love you, Quang.*

“I love you, too, Alma,” says Quang. “And I love your new song.”

“Quang,” I say quietly and with great respect. “This is not *my* song. This is *your* song.”

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## And so we do

Every teacher gives me the same advice: “Write what you know.”

So this is my story. This is what I know. *Actions speak louder than words.*

Maybe you already know that, but we all need a reminder from time to time. At least, I know that I do.

Words are important; that is true. But words can mean nothing if we don't do what we say. And we can learn a lot from watching what other people do, too. For example ...

What if your father had to move to another country to find a job? What if your husband had a car accident and now he is in a wheelchair for the rest of his life? What if you always sat on your hands and never jumped at the chance to do something you always wanted?

Tonight, we are back at the coffee shop. Quang has a new art show, and this is the opening night of his exhibit. It's called: “What If?”

As usual, Quang's paintings are invisible. He keeps the frames very simple because he does not want people to be distracted by the frames. However, Quang writes very interesting titles and descriptions for each work of art. For example, one says:

**What if a boy in a coat with a goat has a row in the bow of a  
robot rowboat?**

**(It's amazing to note how they stay afloat in the moat.)**

Amazing, right? Quang doesn't need paint on canvas. When people look at his invisible paintings, they can hear the picture in their minds. And the picture is always perfect because it is exactly as they imagined it. It's so weird, but it's also so wonderful.

More people now arrive at the exhibit. Everyone is dressed up. They stop in front of each picture. They look. They say something quietly to each other and nod their heads up and down.

The coffee shop owner Mel is mingling, sharing champagne, and challenging strangers: "I dare you," he says. "Tell me what you see."

All of our friends are here, too:

Abdi and Ahmed are debating an invisible painting titled **What if a lobster was a little closer?** Abdi says he sees a close-up of a very big lobster very near to him. Ahmed, however, says he sees a tiny lobster "closing" (successfully finishing) a business deal.

Francisco is piling a plate high with pie. He brought his neighbors—the mother and son. Every time Francisco takes another slice of pie, the boy makes another pi joke. For instance, "Why should you never talk to pi? ... Because he'll just go on forever."

And all eight of the Ukrainian cake cousins seem to be playing musical chairs, sitting down when the music stops and jumping up when it starts again.

Even Onry is here, the man who sang with us here in the coffee-shop.

Onry takes me to an unusual frame. I did not notice it before. It is different from the others. The frame is made of many shapes. The shapes are ukuleles and dogs, ukuleles and dogs, ukuleles and dogs all around the empty space in the middle.

I look for the label to read the title. It says:

**What if a wonderful weirdo wields a box of weird wonder?  
("I do," says he. But will she?)**

I am not sure exactly what it means. It seems to be a riddle. It plays with the words "wonderful weirdo" and "weird wonder."

"What do you see in the painting?" asks Onry. I look at him. Something is different. Something is unusual. Onry smiles as if he has a secret.

"Well," I begin. "'Wonderful weirdo' must be—"

When I turn back to the frame, I now see Quang on the other side.

"And 'to wonder' is to want to know something, or to ask something," I say, not looking away.

Quang smiles as if he has a secret, too.

"So this box must have an unusual question in it," I conclude.

On the other side of the empty frame, Quang gently opens the little box. Inside is a simple ring—a wedding ring.

Onry reads the title of the invisible painting again: “What if a wonderful weirdo wields a box of weird wonder? (‘I do,’ says he. But will she?)”

Quang is speechless. He is so nervous that he cannot find his voice. He cannot find the words. So he blinks his eyes, and I know exactly what it means: “Will you marry me, Alma?”

I blink back to say, “I will.”

Quang reaches through the frame and wraps his arms around me. We kiss, and all of our friends clap and cheer.

Quang wants to put the ring on my finger. First, however, he wants me to look more closely. He wants me to see the words on the inside of the ring. I start laughing. I imagine something like “Our dog has fleas!” That would be so funny.

But then I stop laughing because I can’t see anything. I look on the inside. I look on the outside. I am confused. I look at Quang, and he smiles and blinks his eyes.

That’s when I understand. Like his art, Quang’s words are invisible, too. But his actions speak louder than any words.

I should know this by now, shouldn’t I?

All of a sudden there is music. Abdi plays the drums. Francisco plays the harmonica. And Onry is singing. Quang and I are soon surrounded by the Ukrainian cake cousins clapping and shouting “Bitter! Bitter! Make it sweeter!”

And so we do.

THE END





# Appendix 1: Vocabulary

## CHAPTER 1

- advice
- blush
- flea
- honest
- immigrant
- rhyme
- stained
- sticky
- tiny
- ukulele

## CHAPTER 2

- champagne
- create
- coincidence
- complicated

- imagine
- immediately
- individual
- invisible
- mental
- pinch
- scrunch
- squint

### CHAPTER 3

- amazing
- anthem
- architect
- furthermore
- harmonica
- improvise
- inspire
- instrument
- lean
- rhythm
- whisper
- wink

### CHAPTER 4

- bump

- distracting
- final
- graceful
- impact
- indicate
- lyrics
- meanwhile
- moonbeam
- odd
- potential
- team

## CHAPTER 5

- accent
- accident
- attached
- chew
- communicate
- dramatic
- drum
- enormous
- parade
- prediction
- sparkle

- uniform

## CHAPTER 6

- amused
- ankle
- bakery
- bitter
- bride
- clap
- conclude
- groom
- partner
- spin
- startle
- tradition

## CHAPTER 7

- bang
- energy
- expertise
- fireworks
- goal
- horrified
- jump
- meringue

- mortified
- toast
- vulnerable
- weird

## CHAPTER 8

- blink
- bow
- challenging
- dare
- debate
- exhibit
- frame
- label
- riddle
- rowboat
- speechless
- wield

## Appendix 2: Comprehension Questions

### CHAPTER 1

1. A narrator tells the story. Who is the narrator? Describe that person.
2. Alma plays a musical instrument. What is it? How did it get its name? Describe it.
3. What does “plink, plink, plink, plunk” mean? What does “my dog has fleas?” mean?
4. What does Alma want? Why can’t Alma get what she wants? What is the problem?

### CHAPTER 2

1. Why do people say Quang is weird?
2. How did Alma and Quang first meet?
3. How many songs has Alma written? What are they about?
4. How does Alma get ready to play her ukulele and sing?

### CHAPTER 3

1. The setting is the place and time of the story. Where and when does this story happen?
2. Who are Francisco and Onry? Describe them.
3. Who wrote the song “Lean On Me”? What does it mean?
4. Francisco wants to help Alma do something. What is it?

### CHAPTER 4

1. What is the relationship between the boy and Francisco?
2. Francisco receives an important phone call. Who is calling? Why is it important?
3. Francisco writes a song, but Alma does not take it. Why not?
4. Francisco sings, “Your sunshine is my moonbeam.” What does this mean?

### CHAPTER 5

1. Who are Ahmed and Abdi? Describe them.
2. Why does Abdi use a wheelchair?
3. What musical instrument does Abdi play?
4. What is the special flower of the city of Portland?

### CHAPTER 6

1. Why is Alma so busy today? What is she doing?
2. What happens when Alma drops the heavy bag of flour?
3. At a Ukrainian wedding, what happens when people

shout “Hirko! Hirko!”?

4. Who kisses whom?

## CHAPTER 7

1. Quang tells Alma, “Show me the jumping fleas!” What does he mean?
2. Alma tries to play a song for Quang. What happens?
3. Which lyrics remind us about Francisco, Ahmed and Abdi, and the Ukrainian cake cousins?
4. How does Quang react to Alma’s singing?

## CHAPTER 8

1. What is the difference between “pie” and “pi”?
2. Who is the “wonderful weirdo”?
3. What is in the “box of weird wonder”?
4. What happens at the end of the story?



## Appendix 3: Discussion Questions

### CHAPTER 1

1. Read the title again: *Alma Strikes a Chord*. What do you think it means to “strike a chord”?
2. “Write what you know.” Do you agree with this advice? Why or why not?
3. “Stop saying *But*— all the time! You’re just making excuses!” What does this mean? Do you do this, too?
4. Alma wants to write a song about falling in love for her boyfriend Quang. What is one of your goals?

### CHAPTER 2

1. “Is it weird? Or is it wonderful?” In your opinion, what things are both weird and wonderful?
2. “When I think about it, I guess our meeting was a clear coincidence. Or was it destiny?” Are the words *coincidence* and *destiny* same or different? How do you know? Give an example of each.
3. Go to YouTube. Find the song “Tiny Bubbles.” Listen to it. Do you like the song? Why or why not?

4. Quang and Alma have been dating for 10 years. What does that mean? Is that a long time to date? What is the custom in your country?

### CHAPTER 3

1. Go to YouTube. Find a video of a harmonica. Listen to it. Do you like it? Why or why not?
2. A “slash” is a kind of punctuation. It shows two sides to something. But what does it mean in this story? What is your slash?
3. What is harmony in music? What is harmony in life? Explain.
4. “I don’t know if I am even in love because I don’t think I know what love is.” In your opinion, what is love?

### CHAPTER 4

1. “*Not yet*. I love that phrase. There is so much potential in that phrase *not yet*.” In your opinion, what does this mean?
2. “Isn’t it odd how some people cross paths, but never connect?” Does this happen to you? How do you feel about it?
3. “10 years is a long time. A person can change a lot in 10 years.” Think about yourself 10 years ago. How are you the same? How are you different?
4. “How many times have I said ‘I never thought I would ...’ but then I did? The point is, I think, that we can surprise ourselves. We do things that we don’t think we can do. Things happen that we never expect.” Can you give

an example from your life?

## CHAPTER 5

1. Ahmed always serves guests coffee and dates. What do people do in your country?
2. “When a person speaks English with an accent, it just means that they know more than one language.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. “Some words still get me into trouble. Words are like that; sometimes they are difficult to control.” Do you agree? What words get you into trouble? Why?
4. How do you say “I love you” in your first language? Do you use different words for different people? Explain.

## CHAPTER 6

1. “Soon everyone circles around us, and they throw flour in the air like rice at a wedding.” In the United States, often guests throw uncooked rice at the couple after a wedding. What wedding customs do people in your culture do?
2. “Jump up or sit alone for the rest of your life.” This is a superstition. What superstitions are in your culture?
3. “The tradition says that if something is bitter, then kissing will sweeten it.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. Vodka, coffee, and beer are examples of bitter things. But people can be bitter, too. How?

## CHAPTER 7

1. Why does Alma feel nervous and vulnerable? When do

you feel this way?

2. “My mind jumps back in time. The weather makes me think of Francisco’s sunshine. My racing heart reminds me of Abdi’s drumbeat. And when I overhear Veronika’s laughter from the bakery downstairs, I instantly jump to my feet so that I do not break tradition. Each of these things reminds me of my wish, my goal, my dream—and my failure.” What are some things that remind you of your goals, dreams, or failures? Describe one.
3. Alma wanted to write a song for Quang. Do you think Quang knew this? Why or why not?
4. Do you think Alma is happy about their song? How do you know?

## CHAPTER 8

1. “Actions speak louder than words” is a popular idiom. In your opinion, what does it mean? Do you have a similar saying your first language?
2. The title of the new art show is “What If.” In your opinion, why did Quang choose this title?
3. Mel challenges people by saying “I dare you. Tell me what you see.” Why do you think he does this?
4. Quang asks Alma to marry him. We call this a wedding proposal. How do people make wedding proposals in your culture?

## Appendix 4: Activities

1. Write the melody for the “My Dog Has Fleas” song in Chapter 7. Or help Alma write a new song for Quang.
2. Find or draw pictures to illustrate each chapter. Add a quote from the story to each illustration.
3. Imagine your own invisible painting. Write a label to describe it. Put the labels on the walls around the classroom for an invisible exhibition.
4. Ask classmates about wedding traditions in their country. Put them together in a book. Explain the meaning for each tradition.