**Ona**

Sarah Normandie

Ona is a large old woman that is still able to get down on the carpet to play with the babies. Everyone tells me working with her will be the worst experience of my life. *She’s mean*, they say. *She yells*. My boss at the daycare where I work puts me with Ona because everyone else refuses to work with her.

It’s the summer of 2001. I drive my beat-up Hyundai with no AC forty-five minutes each morning to get to the center at 6:30 am sharp to make bottles and rice cereal for eight babies that will all arrive by seven. Ona and I rock, feed, and change each of their diapers while also getting them down to nap by nine. Just the two of us.

We complain about the work.

“It’s too much for just two people,” she says while spoon feeding two ten-month old toddlers strapped into their highchairs. Raffi blasts *Baby Beluga* from our CD player. I’m changing diapers and making funny faces at baby Sofia. She’s colic and only stops crying when she’s being entertained.

We work for a federally funded daycare run on grant dollars. The center smells like rotten eggs because there’s sulfur in the water. Sometimes we stick to the floors because the janitor doesn’t always do the best job cleaning. We aren’t supposed to give the babies baths but sometimes we go in the corner and try to clean baby David’s cradle cap because it’s getting worse. Elsie always comes hungry with a wet diaper. She just learned to walk and hugs my leg each time I stand up. She cries when I leave the room, so I try to hold my pee.

“Someday,” Ona says, “You’re going to run with the big dogs, and show ‘em how to run this place!”

I laugh, thinking she’s crazy. Right now, I’m just trying to pay my rent and get through college.

Ona sings the babies a Lithuanian lullaby as we rock them to sleep. It’s a tune that consists of only one made up word. She sings something that sounds like “Aye Aye Aye Aye . . .” in different tones. It’s a peaceful song that will be stuck in my head for decades.

When the babies are settled and before our extra help arrives, we have a few minutes to talk. Ona tells me about moving to America from Lithuania when she was sixteen. She says she lived in New York City and used to pass models on the streets of New York doing “big model shoots.” She always wanted to be like them until she noticed they were so skinny, that they shook while the photographers took their pictures. She says they wore piles of makeup and looked nothing like the magazine covers.

She tells me she used to like to ride the subway. She says she moved to this Connecticut rust mill town in her twenties, back when there were jobs and Main Street was filled with shops, not halfway houses. This reminds me that I forgot to do the daily playground safety check. We have to check it each morning for heroin needles.

Ona lives alone, but her daughter is building her a house. Her daughter’s boyfriend is studying how to flip houses and Ona is going to give him some money she’s saved for his first flip. She says her apartment is full of boxes of things she bought from the Home Shopping Network that she’ll decorate her new house with. I hope she isn’t getting scammed, but I don’t say anything. You can’t tell Ona what to do.

We work like this for two years, Ona singing her Lithuanian lullaby and both of us rocking babies and changing diapers. *How can you stand her?* the other girls ask. I tell them Ona is special and they should give her a chance. I regret saying this one day when Ona yells at me. She loses her tempter and tells me I’m lazy and should be rocking three cribs like her. I’m sitting on the floor giving a baby a bottle. It’s true, I’ve chosen to sit with the baby because I’m not feeling well. I start to cry, a burst of hormones I don’t understand. Ona feels bad after our fight. The next day she brings me a brand-new poetry book she saw on Oprah and a lottery card to make up. “If you win, you can get out of this place,” she says. She writes a special message inside the book but says not to read it until I get home.

I’m not feeling good because I’m pregnant. I take my pregnancy test on my lunch break and come back to a room full of screaming babies. I have no idea how I am going to raise a child on daycare pay, but Ona tells me it will be okay. I’ll be done with college soon.

She’s right. I leave and three years later I come back. I’m dressed up and helping to put on a training. I’m a director now, running four childcare centers funded by the same grant. Ona smiles when she sees me and says, “I told you you’d run with the big dogs and would show ‘em how it’s done.”

I think about this today as I stand inside the state Capitol, gazing at its marble and statutes amongst the hustle and bustle of politicians, media, and lobbyists. I’m an attorney now. I’ve lived many lives since those days when I was covered in baby spit up and finger paint. But I’ve never forgotten. I wonder how Ona is doing.

I look for Ona online but find her obituary instead. I cry. I shut my computer and pull the poetry book off my shelf and open it to her message. *Reach for the stars*, she wrote.

I smile. I can see her face and hear her song, “Aye, Aye, Aye, Aye.” I hum it softly, thankful to have known Ona.