

Expert in a Dying Field

by Eamon Webb, First Place Recipient - Open category

Alma had an earache. She closed her eyes for an agonising moment, feeling it in full, hoping she might trick her mind into deciding she'd felt enough of it. It didn't work. She peered out to the bright, retro-chic studio set. Two cameras were set at forty-five-degree angles from two royal-blue armchairs. The chairs were separated by a circular glass table dressed by a vase of freesias. On stage, the host spoke in a polished, sing-song tone and sat serenely, a doctor's office poster of good posture come to life. *She sounds exactly like Julie Andrews*, Alma thought.

"Good evening, I'm Kendra. Tonight on *This is Your Life*, we welcome the vivacious and inimitable Alma Faithfull. We are so grateful she can join us to share her inspirational story. Welcome, Alma!" A startlingly-loud round of applause catalysed Alma into an arrhythmic shuffle out to the set, where she shook Kendra's cold hand and misjudged the descent into an armchair much less comfortable than it looked. Alma pulled her head back involuntarily and blinked, adjusting to the bright studio lights. A holographic montage of baby photos filled the air around them. Kendra, perfectly poised, waited for her guest.

"Alma: born in the twilight of the last millennium, you have lived a full and purposeful life, and enjoyed many successes, both professional and personal. You never sought the spotlight, but tonight you find it deservedly upon you, all the same. An icon and inspiration to so many, I feel I must begin with this: how does it feel to be Alma Faithfull?"

Good question. Alma shifted her weight, trying to get comfortable. "Hello, Kendra, was it? Thank you for having me, though I still don't understand why you'd want me on *This is Your Life* - I'm just an ordinary person. When I was growing up, this show was for celebrities and heroes. But you asked how it feels to be me? Well, I have an earache, to be honest, and I'm a little thirsty. But otherwise, it feels fine."

"I see," said Kendra, "modest, as always. Tonight, we get to see what makes you tick." The host gestured almost imperceptibly towards two glasses of water on the table. *Were they always there?* When Alma offered the second glass to her, Kendra shook her head lightly and shone a megawatt TV star smile. "Alma, you were born the daughter of an accountant and a teacher, an only child in late 1900s Brisbane. Tell me a little about your childhood."

Alma took her time, trying to recall an interesting anecdote. There was a hum from the crew, who knew their chatter could be isolated and deleted in post-production. They weren't particularly invested, either; this was the old lady's sixth time on the show, after all. Alma caught the scent of the freesias as she shuffled in her seat and looked into Kendra's unnervingly blue eyes. "My childhood was wonderful," she began. "I would ride my bike home from school and stay outside all afternoon, watching the clouds or playing games with the other kids in the street. My cousin Lucy would come to visit from Melbourne each July and enjoy the Queensland sunshine. My parents were kind. It was just a normal life. I had the luxury of boredom and idle time. I liked school, but I found writing difficult. I had too many ideas and couldn't figure out which ones to use."

"I can relate!" Kendra said, touching Alma's arm for just a little too long. The guest pulled her arm back. Something about her touch didn't feel genuine.

"Where was I?" Alma continued. "Well, despite finding writing difficult, I loved to read. Books took me far away and into worlds I couldn't visit. I became especially interested in archaeology. I wanted to visit the lasagne city of Rome, to see the layers of civilisations stacked on top of one another, each one believing their time to be the most important." Suddenly, Alma felt a shiver and cleared her throat. "That leads me nicely into my next question," sang Kendra. You met your husband Dale on a dig of Brisbane's former CBD in 2046. What drew you to him?" Alma felt her stomach drop. *I had a husband?* She took another sip of water. *What happened to him?* "Before I answer that, why don't you tell me your impression of him? From your research, I mean." *And what had happened to Brisbane? Where were they now?*

"Turning the tables! Classic Alma," Kendra said with a wink. "Well, from what I can tell, you and Dale hit it off right away, finding common interests in work and otherwise. You both loved music and would perform for friends and family at your famous dinner parties. Here's a photo of one of those memorable occasions."

A life-sized photograph of a mid-30s couple appeared between Alma and Kendra, somehow the right-way-around for both to see. The young woman had a carefree smile. She held a guitar and was looking towards the young man. He – clearly a performer – was pouting mid-croon, his arms blurred slightly from dancing. There were other people on the veranda too, but Alma didn't see them. *They look beautiful together. He has kind eyes,* Alma thought, blushing a little. *Dale, was it? I should remember him. Why don't I remember him?* Her brow furrowed.

Kendra mistook this frustration for sadness. “I understand I am bringing up some difficult memories for you, Alma. You’ve noted that you and Dale did not consider yourselves to be special, but as it turned out, you were some of the Last People. Knowing what you know now, would you have made a different choice and had children? I’m sure the people at home would love to hear more about that.” Alma bristled, suddenly lucid. She knew where she was. She’d been here before.

“The people at home? We both know there are no people at home. You know nobody is watching this, either. TV was dead even when I was young! This is all just being recorded for some data farm somewhere. So you and your pals can learn how to be more human.”

Kendra smiled wistfully. “I recognise some anger there. Run me through that emotion again, if you don’t mind?” Alma’s shoulders shook sporadically, as if she’d just come into an overheated room from the cold.

“I do mind! You asked me how it felt to be me earlier? Well, I’d like to go back to that question! Kendra, you don’t know the bitter heat of an earache. You can’t smell these flowers. You’ve never been busting for the toilet, or had pangs of hunger intrude your every thought. You don’t know the zero-gravity bliss of new love. Or the total annihilation of your world when it ends. Look at you, smiling away, rain, hail, or shine. You have glowing skin, but so what? What’s clear skin if you’ve never had a pimple!” Kendra beamed, totally unfazed.

“There’s that classic Alma passion we love!” Another round of canned applause startled Alma. “I imagine this is difficult, but you’re doing really well,” Kendra hummed in her Mary Poppins voice.

Alma felt the gradual heat of a rant long repressed. “Actually, Kendra, I’m not sure you *can* imagine it,” she said, loudly. “Everyone has trouble imagining, now. I think it’s because when I imagine, it’s to escape reality, or to dream beyond my present, or to let my mind wander. But people today don’t have a reality, so why would they escape? Everything can change instantly, there is no routine, no suffering, no boredom. That’s what reality is - being where you are and not where you might be. Life is the average day that makes the nice day stand out. And those nice days make life worth living.” She was standing now, more alive than ever. “You know, sometimes, I used to keep myself so busy, for fear of letting my mind wander into feelings too big to name. It’s different now, though. Now, everyone keeps busy because they’ve learned to keep busy. But you know what would happen if they stopped? Absolutely nothing. Emotional static. Standby mode. A name for every feeling, but no way to feel anything. Imagine that!”

Alma hadn't expected this outcry, but if Kendra was surprised, she didn't show it.

"You certainly see things uniquely, Alma. That's why we love to have you. I noticed you said, 'people today.' Have you finally come to recognise bots like me as people?"

Alma closed her eyes, her earache throbbing again. Hot tears pricked her eyelids.

"A force of habit, Kendra. I talk to you because I have nobody else to talk to. I call you a person, because that's what I'm used to. But you're not a person. You never will be."

Kendra rose to her feet with a mechanical hiss and held out a fingerless, titanium hand. Alma shoved her hands in her cardigan pockets. She just wanted to go home.

Kendra turned to the non-existent audience, raised her arm in a royal wave, and gave an eerily long smile. "Maybe next time! That brings us to the end of our time together. I've been Kendra, and Alma Faithfull, this is your life!"

(1537 words)

*Inspired by The Beths' 2022 song, *Expert in a Dying Field*. Lyrics by Elizabeth Stokes.