

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JLS-28 In the Matter of Alberta Lessard -- VII

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New York, New York 10011
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

In April, 1976, the West Allis police took Alberta back to the North Division Mental Health Center, and I telephoned her on Ward 3-D to find out what had happened.

"I'm a little bit confused myself on some of the details," Alberta began, "but I remember that I went into my next-door neighbor's yard, Mr. Pickert, and I pulled up some tulips and some rhubarb. Then I went out into the middle of the street. I'd wave at the cars and stop them right in front of my house, and I gave the people who were driving what I figured was less than thirty-five miles an hour tulips, and the people who I figured were going anywhere from thirty-five up to the hundreds, I gave these people rhubarbs. They'd say 'thank you' and drive on. It was after that that I got picked up."

"Rhubarb leaves are poisonous," I pointed out.

"Yes, they're poisonous," Alberta conceded sheepishly, "but only if you eat them. Anyway, Mr. Pickert, my neighbor, called the fire

Jeffrey Steingarten was until recently an Institute Fellow interested in the relationship among psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and law. This is his last newsletter.

department, and he said that I was lying in the street and that I pulled his tulips." Alberta laughed. "He didn't say anything about rhubarb. It was the fire department that called the police. They said they had had dealings with me before and they felt I was mentally ill, and they left it up to the police to decide what to do with me. But the interesting thing is, the fire department is the one who has the Rescue Squad. Now if the report was that I was lying down in the street, can you tell me why the fire department wouldn't come with their Rescue Squad? I think they were a little bit negligent, you know, because they didn't know but what I could have been hit by a car."

"Were you lying in the street, Alberta?"

"Yes, I was. That's true. I was. I'd have to say so. But it was perfectly safe." Alberta thought to herself for a few seconds. "Now why I did that--I still don't know why I did something like that." She giggled uneasily. "But I did it. Anyway, it was safe for me to be there."

I asked Alberta why she had been handing out rhubarb and tulips in the first place.

She explained that after my visit the previous February, she set out to collect every document, transcript, and file she could find to do with her federal case, her four previous spells at North Division, her dismissal as a school teacher, her innumerable arrests, and the nights she had spent in jail. Every day for several weeks she paid calls on the West Allis police department, the Milwaukee County sheriff's office, the federal and county courthouses, the state civil service department, and the Day Care Center of the hospital to get them. "Almost always I ran into the problem of the sheriff's removing me from the building. According to my federal court case, I should be allowed reasonable access to my records, both court and medical. But no matter where I went, the police chased me out of the building, four or five times from the county courthouse and three times from the Day Care Center."

The officers at the West Allis police headquarters refused to give Alberta most of the information she asked for, just the dates of her arrests and the charges against her but not what she had actually done or the names of the arresting officers. She was there quite a time. The policemen would hold the record cards just out of her reach, not letting her touch them or copy the information. So Alberta ascertained the line of command from the bottom on up and told them all they were violating her rights. They reacted with what Alberta took to be amusement.

"At the civil service department, I told one of the people who was filling out an application for a job that he didn't have to put down whether he had been in a mental hospital, that it would jeopardize his opportunities for getting a job. Then I turned around and told all of the people, maybe there would be thirty or forty of them, that they need not fill out those questions. You know, it was their right, and they seemed to appreciate what I was doing. But the people behind the desk didn't like that. They said I was disrupting, that I didn't have any right to be demonstrating." Alberta thought to herself for a moment. "Of course, I did also tell them I was going to get Judge Seraphim mentally examined."

Each time Alberta was removed from the Day Care Center of the hospital, she would go back in, trying to get her records again. The last time, the sheriff's deputies refused to let her drive home herself and instead gave her a lift in the squad car.

"My car was still at the hospital," Alberta continued, "eight or ten miles away, and I had no way of getting back there. Well, I could have taken a bus and then transferred, but, you know, I don't ride the bus. So I left my apartment and was going for a walk and these kids came along, and I tried talking them into driving me. They said they would if I

gave them some money, and I gave them five dollars. Do you know what they did? They just drove off with the money. I remember thinking about the sheriff's depriving me of getting my records when they're supposed to be out there directing traffic." Alberta began to giggle. "That's when I went into Mr. Pickert's yard and pulled up his tulips and his rhubarb and went into the middle of the street."

"What sort of mood were you in?" I asked her.

"I can't say for sure. In a way I thought it was funny. And I do think I was hurt because they didn't let me get my records. I don't know as I would say I was angry. I can't say that. Maybe I was to a degree, but I don't think I get angry too easily. I do once in a while, but more often hurt, I think I'd call it."

Alberta stopped to think for several seconds, and then went on.

"I remember fighting, trying to keep out of the police vehicle. But I also remember that I kidded with the police on the way to the hospital. One of them had a U.S. flag on his uniform, and I told him that he didn't deserve that flag because they were doing this to me when they didn't have any right. I said I should have the flag, not him. He said I couldn't have the flag, so I said, well, I'd settle for his cap. Anyway, I was wearing the cap when we got to the hospital. Now, I mustn't have irritated them too much or they wouldn't have let me wear it.

"They took me to the emergency admissions ward, and here is the part I can't remember. It seems to me that there was a struggle about me taking medicine--either that or about me staying there, I don't know which. Later someone told me that I threw a shoe. Anyway, they drugged me and put me in restraints for what seems to me forever and ever and ever. They have a light up above in the ceiling that shines in your eyes all the

while. Your arms are in leathers, you're stretched out with your arms from one side of the bed to the other, and your legs are also stretched out. Now I've seen men that are in full leathers, and they are not in the same position. Their legs are together."

"I wonder why they put you in restraints. Did you cause a ruckus?"

"Well, the only thing I can figure out is that they wanted to punish me for refusing to take medicine. You know, I'm so terribly allergic to medicine. The last two or three days I've been treated nicely and I haven't been punished. But prior to that--whew, I'm telling you!--I've had no rights. So far I have still not been outside. I've had diarrhea almost all the while and I've lost fifteen pounds. And they took my garden away."

"Your garden?"

"One of the aides knows I like to garden, and I talked her into bringing me some dirt and some seed, and I grew plants on the ward, different kinds of squash and cucumbers and vegetables. I was going to take them home. But they took them away from me and put them in the kitchen where I couldn't get at them any more." Alberta's tone became confidential. "I did sneak in there a couple times to water them. Now why did they take that garden away from me? They didn't seem to complain about my having a garden. I don't know what I did that got them upset. Unless it was something with the food. See, they had been making me eat out in the hall, so I sneaked upstairs and ate with the patients up there."

I asked Alberta whether by interviewing her about the Lessard case and reviving her interest in the details, I may have been indirectly responsible for her latest trip to North Division.

"Yes, I believe you were," Alberta chuckled, "but you don't have to feel bad about that."

"Do you have a lawyer yet, Alberta?"

"Bob Blondis left just a little while ago. I have my hearing in two days, and Bob said they would let me go home if I gave them a stipulation. Bob suggested I go along with it. As he explained it, it's really like Russian roulette because if you have a hearing, you could be committed for life. I don't want that to happen, but at the same time, I'm not overly happy about it because, you know, it's really one of those situations where you're being coerced into something you don't approve."

I asked Alberta about the stipulation. "It would simply be that I would agree to make contact with Dr. Holbrooke if I feel it's necessary," Alberta explained. "It's a form of coercion. It's like the government saying that I must have a psychiatrist, and if I don't, they'll throw me in a mental hospital. And I don't feel there's any need for treatment. I don't feel I'm mentally ill or anything else. And even though it isn't written that way, anyone who reads it would think I was."

"I would also have to admit that I had been stopping traffic and so forth when the sheriff's department brought me back here," Alberta continued. "But after all, I shouldn't have to give that information out. I'm not supposed to incriminate myself, and I feel that that's incriminating myself. They don't have any right to keep me here, period, because I'm supposed to be innocent until proven guilty. So I think that, instead of saying some of the things I told Bob I would, I think I'm going to tell the judge that I was kidnapped, and I was falsely imprisoned, and you name it, and I was subjected to cruel and unusual punishment by being drugged, drugs that were physically damaging and...and brain-damaging too. I'll have to think of a better word for that. But I do think I should tell all that at my hearing. And another thing. I was in restraints and drugged for my

probable cause hearing. Now the judge would certainly have to be insane to say that that fit the Lessard decision, wouldn't he?"

"But they're not really following Lessard in Milwaukee,"

I pointed out.

"They say they are."

"And Bob doesn't know what you plan to do at the hearing?" I asked.

"No, he doesn't," Alberta admitted. "I didn't think of it until he left. You know, that's always a problem. But the thing is, I do things spontaneously. They ask you a question and you...kind of without thinking you give an answer like that because...because it's what really happened."

Alberta paused for a moment. "What do you think I should do, Jeff?"

"If I were you, Alberta, I wouldn't do anything without clearing it with Bob. I'm a little worried about what may happen at your hearing. There are lots of ways to stay in the hospital and one way to get out. Bob's had experience in cases like this, and he knows how the judge will react. But you'll have to make up your own mind."

"I'm so afraid that I might shout out in that courtroom," Alberta said. "It definitely is injustice. It amounts to the same thing as, what do you call it, plea bargaining. There you're found guilty of a crime that you didn't commit. I'm not guilty of anything, really, just trying to get my rights. And yet it ends up where I'm made to appear guilty of something. I just don't like always being accused of things I'm not guilty of. It goes against my grain." There was hurt in Alberta's voice.

"You're in a tough spot, Alberta."

"I know I am."

At the other end of the line, someone was talking to Alberta, and when she returned to the phone, she said, anxiously, "They told me

I've been on the phone too long. Can you suggest something quick?"

Alberta began to laugh, and just as I joined in, the phone went dead.

In the end, Alberta agreed to go along with the stipulation that Bob Blondis had worked out. She behaved decorously at her hearing and was immediately released from North Division. Alberta celebrated over lunch with Judy, the mother of a former first-grader of hers, and Hazel and Edith, two contemporaries from Madison, Wisconsin, who, committed five years ago to the hospital there, occupy their days agitating against the hospital director.

The next day Alberta ventured back to North Division to retrieve her garden and some clothing she had forgot in her haste to return home. "I hardly have one piece of clothing that doesn't have 'Mental Health Center' marked on it from the five times I was there," Alberta says.

To recompense Mr. Pickert for the rhubarb and tulips she had pulled up, Alberta gave him most of the vegetables in her hospital garden. She planted the vegetable squash in her own yard along with thirty new tomato plants, zucchini, carrots, cucumbers, and parsley. The squash, conceived in the mental hospital, produced beautiful vines that never ripened, but the others thrived, and September saw an abundant harvest for Alberta.

There were, though, two weeks in the summer when Alberta had to suspend her gardening, two weeks when she was forced again to call North Division home.

It seems that after a month's recuperation from the rhubarb and tulip affair, Alberta set out once more to collect her records. On June 17, a Thursday, she was removed twice from the West Allis Administration Building. On Friday, the sheriff's department ejected her from the Safety Building downtown. Saturday and Sunday, Alberta rested. On Monday the 21st, the sheriff's deputies chased her out of the City Hall. On Tuesday, the police made her leave the mental hospital. On Wednesday, back at the West Allis Administration Building, Alberta accused the city government of stealing her mail and depriving her of her livelihood, and just to show them what she meant, she began removing mail from the open boxes of some city officials. "This one looks like a check," Alberta was saying as a policeman appeared to make the arrest. He locked Alberta in the back seat of his squad car, and as he walked around to the front, Alberta sprang into the driver's seat. The officer charged her with attempting to steal a police car. Down at the station house, there was an altercation about whether Alberta would have to spend the night there, and somehow she was accused of trying to steal a policeman's gun. "And they say they don't keep women overnight in jail!" Alberta points out.

In her cell that evening, Alberta whiled away the time monkeying with the lock on her cell door. Nothing would get it to work. And then, just like that, the door swung open. Alberta sneaked out through the back door of the station house, ran around to the front, and casually walked in.

"A prisoner has escaped," Alberta announced breathlessly to the officers on duty. "You better go and catch that prisoner."

The policemen looked at each other, looked at Alberta, and pounced.

"I think they cracked three ribs," Alberta recalls, laughing so hard she can hardly speak. "One policeman on each side grabbed me like

as if I was stealing their guns. And here I thought it was a big joke. Boy, did they give me a bear hug. I came back, gave myself up. There wasn't any reason to treat me rough."

They threw Alberta back in her cell and the next morning fingerprinted her and photographed her, found a public defender, and brought her before a judge. Her jury trial will take place some time this spring.

"I'm getting to be a good criminal," Alberta says. "You can see I'm going to be in jail for life on this one. I've already been in court four times on it, in front of four different judges. Now that's what I call quadruplet jeopardy."

The next day, released on her own recognizance, Alberta headed straight for the city welfare department. "I was curious to know what they had on me, and while I was there, I passed out some sweetpeas. They threw me in the hospital. Now there was nothing wrong with that."

"Is that all you did, Alberta?" I ask.

"Well, they said I was singing like a bird. I must say that I was telling them that Judge Seraphim should be committed. I did tell them that. Three times the sheriffs came and took me out. But they wouldn't let me go to my car, so I just went right back in. The third time they took me to the hospital. That simple."

Two weeks later Bob Blondis managed to win Alberta's release.

"This time," Alberta says, "I was unconstitutionally imprisoned for fifteen days, from June 25 to July 9. The hospital says it was fourteen days, but I always count the day I go in and the day I go out. As far as I'm concerned, when it's incarceration you count both. If you're paying for it at a hotel, well then you only count one of them." Alberta laughs. She seems relieved to have got out of the hospital again. "I was getting awfully sick of it, and

I didn't want to stay there forever. But still--you know, that isn't the way I wanted to get out. You always end up feeling like as if you're not getting a chance to be heard. I always end up feeling that."

Alberta's first stop after leaving North Division was the parking lot at the welfare office, where her car remained. The back seat had been stolen and the radio thrown into a nearby vacant lot, and there was a ticket for two weeks of overparking.

"I argued that ticket myself and won," Alberta says proudly. "That's the only fair hearing I've ever had."

On a snowy evening in November, 1976, I pay Alberta a visit in West Allis. She now lives in a three-room apartment on the ground floor of a frame house on 84th Street, near the corner of Grant. Her livingroom is decorated predominantly in shades of brown--the rug and walls, the three-piece sectional, an easy chair, and the bench under the window--all of it frayed at the edges and seams. Alberta is careful with her things, and apart from a chaos of files and papers in one corner of the room that appear to be work-in-progress, Alberta is meticulously neat. Today she is wearing dark brown wool slacks and a fuzzy tan sweater with a Scandanavian pattern in the yoke. Her light blue eyes are as playful as ever, but her short auburn hair is a bit grayer than the last time I saw her. Standing just over five feet seven and weighing scarcely more than one hundred twenty pounds, her figure is trim and lithe for a woman of fifty-six.

Alberta offers me a cup of coffee and a square of nut cake right from the oven and topped with freshly whipped cream. It is delicious.

Alberta has spent the past few months compiling an exhaustive history of the wrongs she feels have been inflicted on her--twenty or more

illegal arrests, six unconstitutional spells in the mental hospital, her unjustified dismissal from the West Allis school, Marquette University's refusal to let her continue in the doctoral program, the inadequate representation she has received from the nine lawyers who have worked for her in one matter or another over the past twenty years. Alberta has collected what she estimates to be nine thousand newspaper clippings as documentation and hundreds of legal cases as precedents. And now she is preparing a monumental petition to submit to the federal district court in Milwaukee. Already it stretches to sixty-eight pages. "I have volumes of stuff on everyone," she says. "It's all those people who do things wrong, one after the other, and nobody does anything about them. So I figure I've got to get into court to have them stopped."

Among other things, Alberta wants a writ of mandamus for the legal and administrative records she still lacks. She is going to prove, once and for all, that she is not now and never has been mentally ill. She is petitioning to have Judge Christ T. Seraphim mentally examined and hospitalized as dangerous to others. And she wants Jimmy Carter removed from the presidency for his complicity with the National Education Association, which endorsed him during the 1976 campaign and which, Alberta still feels, was responsible for her dismissal from the West Allis school system.

"You should never have voted for Carter," she tells me scoldingly. "And now you're going to lose him. You just lost your vote." Alberta has been up most of the past three nights, working on her petition, and the strains of fatigue and effort show in her face.

A few days ago, Alberta took the first half of her petition to Bob Blondis for his advice. "Bob was real nice about looking it over. He said it was very interesting, very, very interesting. He didn't give me half the argument on this that he did on my federal court case. But I've

got him all puzzled. He couldn't figure out how I was going to get back into federal court. Of course, he always gives me those arguments. He always has to tell me I'm wrong first. I told him,"--Alberta begins to laugh--"I told him that this time I'll get it all in because I'm going to fire him. I'm going to represent myself, and he can be the coattorney and work under me. As long as I'm the boss, people aren't going to get by. I really am not a hard boss, though."

Alberta pours me another cup of coffee. "Another thing I want to argue in federal court," she says, "is that there should be no such thing as involuntary mental commitment."

"You don't think that anyone should be forced into the mental hospital?" I ask.

"No, not involuntarily. If they go voluntarily that's different. And if they commit a crime and if they are dangerous, well then they can be imprisoned."

"Then in your six times at North Division you've never met a patient who you could say was properly committed?"

"Not a one. I would certainly say that I was much more afraid of the people who put me there and of the people who were supposed to be taking care of me, much more afraid of them than of any patient there. Even the one that shoved me down the stairs, the one who was in there on assault. You know, he did that playfully."

Alberta stops for a moment to reconsider her answer. "Well, I will say that there was one patient I was a little afraid of. I don't know whether she was involuntarily committed or otherwise, though I do think she came involuntarily. A dozen times she would take the blankets off other patients' beds and then she'd come to my bed at night and try to put them over my head. Just all of a sudden you wake up with someone putting a

blanket over your head. I was a little bit afraid she was trying to suffocate me, and you know, that scares me. Of all the patients, she's the only one I was scared of, really."

"But shouldn't people who attempt suicide be hospitalized for their own good?"

"I am opposed to seeing someone take their life," Alberta replies, "but I don't know how you can stop it. If there isn't one way they could do it, they could do it in another. Anyway, I can't even imagine anyone really committing suicide, although I was accused of it myself. But I suppose that a person that's weaker than I am might have tried it, with some of the treatment I've had, I'll guarantee you. Now if someone is doing something dangerous to himself, well you have the right to talk to them or appeal to them--to even beg them. If you're sympathetic, I think that the chances of them killing themselves are going to be far less. But to actually commit them? I don't know."

"The usual rationale for committing them," I say, "is that some people want to kill themselves because they are mentally ill and that if they receive psychiatric care, their outlook will improve, they'll no longer want to kill themselves, and they'll thank you for forcing them into the hospital in the first place."

"I do agree that there is such a thing as mental illness," Alberta replies. "To a degree. But I don't know whether I would call it mental illness. I don't like to use the term. I would rather even the word depression, or that you're hurt or angry, or any of those terms. I think they describe more fully. I'll agree that people have problems--that's a better way of putting it. But I think those are normal problems. I think it's normal for people once in a while to be depressed or to be

angry. And I'm very concerned about people who aren't. Those are the people I'm concerned about."

"But haven't you seen patients who were more than just normally angry or depressed? Haven't you come across severe catatonics at North Division?"

"I don't know as I've ever really seen anyone who would be a real severe catatonic. I've seen some who would stiffen out for a little bit, but maybe only for two or three minutes. That's the longest I've ever seen anyone in a catatonic state. And to be honest about it, I'm not real sure I would call it a catatonic state. See, maybe they're just actually resting or something. It would be an odd position for me, but they could have been comfortable. How do I know?"

"Have you ever asked them?"

"Well, yes, I've talked to them. But I don't think I asked them why they stiffened out. You know, you talk to them in a different way than you talk to an outsider."

"Then you don't think a psychiatrist can be of much help to anyone?"

"Not really. Not the way psychiatrists function today. Almost all psychiatrists are doing it either for the state or for personal benefit, and as long as they're getting paid for it, you're not going to find many people who can really do the right kind of job. And when you read their reports, they say exactly the same things about everybody. You know very well that they aren't doing a person any good. In the first place, they aren't diagnosing them accurately or they wouldn't have the same report on all of them. And in the second place, you know that the treatment's going

to be the same for all of them. Now you can't tell me that all the people are going to need the same treatment. They don't treat them as human beings. They treat them as objects, more or less. But people aren't made that way. You have to treat them just as you want to be treated, and you're going to get somewhere.

"And I'm going to say that any human being who is warm and loves people can do a thousand times more than any psychiatrist that I have ever seen," Alberta continues. "You'd be surprised the people who come and ask me for help and always have. It's unbelievable how many have come here. Like a lot of these people who are committed call me constantly whenever they have a problem. They're a little afraid to go to a psychiatrist, or they want to get their records and they don't want to be there alone. And then, if they have records that they don't understand, they bring them over here.

"Just last week this woman called. She had gone to all these psychiatrists and wasn't satisfied with any of them. She wanted to go to another one, and she wanted me to go along. She said, 'Well why don't we both get examined?'"

Alberta begins to laugh. "I put a stop to that one fast! Now, she's maybe as close to mental illness as any you could find. Because she doesn't understand herself. She's dependent on other people. She feels she can't function, and she trusts the psychiatrist more than she does herself. And to me, that isn't clear thinking. Well, she is having a divorce and that can shake you up a bit. But any of these things can shake you. You know, she's accepting the fact she's mentally ill. See, that's the part that I could never accept."

"Wait a minute, Alberta. How can you argue that mental illness doesn't exist and that people shouldn't be involuntarily committed and at the same time..."

Alberta interrupts. "And now I want to have Judge Seraphim mentally committed?"

"I've got you there."

"No, I've got you. I don't feel Judge Seraphim is mentally ill, but I do feel he's dangerous. People like me have been punished by people like him for an awfully long time, and I am saying that they should be punished on their own laws. They have to be made to see what it's like so they won't want to do it to other people. But I'd give them rights they've never given me, and I don't even mean that we should be as brutal with them as maybe they were with me. I couldn't stand and watch that myself. But I'm saying, give them some of it." Alberta chuckled. "Of course, if you gave them all I got, it'd cure them quicker."

"But by your own theory, if people are dangerous, they should go to jail, not to the mental hospital."

"I suppose that's true. I've always said that. Otherwise, it's an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I suppose you would say that."

The telephone rings and Alberta picks up the receiver.

"Hello?" Alberta listens for a moment, then smiles and straightens up in her chair. "No, this isn't Alberta," she says, trying to make her voice sound deep as a man's. "This is Pete Legaux." Alberta stifles a giggle. "Yes, Pete Legaux."

Alberta's eyes are bright with mischief. "Oh, I sound like a woman, do I? Well, that's my alias.... My real name? Three nineteen, eighteen, twelve fifty-nine." She puts her hand over the mouthpiece and whispers to me, "That's my social security number."

She listens a moment more. "What do I want? You know very well I didn't call you. You called me. Now what do you want?"

Alberta says goodbye and hangs up the receiver.

She explains to me that it was a member of the Waukeshaw, Wisconsin, sheriff's department, who also called two nights ago. Every so often in the evenings, the sheriff's office or the West Allis police call Alberta just to talk and maybe have a little fun. Not one to disappoint other people's expectations, Alberta usually gives them a good time, putting on an odd voice, using an alias, giving them enigmatic answers to their provocative questions. "If they're going to ask me screwball questions," she says, "well then I'll give them screwball answers."

Pete Legaux is Alberta's favorite alias. She started using it some years ago at the emergency admissions office of the mental hospital. When the police brought her in that time, Alberta heard everyone on the staff saying things like, "Alberta's back again," and "Uh-oh, it's Alberta Lessard." And yet when the resident on duty came to fill out her intake forms, he asked her as officiously and impersonally as could be, "Name please?" Now he knew Alberta's name just as well as he knew his own. Alberta decided to try an alias, and Pete Legaux was the first that came to mind. Thinking back on it now, Alberta recalls that Pete Legaux was a well-known character from her childhood in the Ladysmith area of Wisconsin, way up north. But she can't quite remember who he was.

"I'll have to check on that," she says. "Everyone knows me, no matter where I go. Two-thirds of the people don't even ask my name. They'll say, you're Alberta Lessard, aren't you? Especially the police and the sheriff and the F.B.I. I can pick up this receiver and call any time of the day or night, and if I don't tell them who I am, then they say, 'You're Alberta Lessard, aren't you?' Sometimes I try them out, just to see, when I don't have anyone else to talk to."

"How often do you call the F.B.I., Alberta?"

"Every now and then."

"Once a week?"

"Oh, more often than that." We both laugh. "Okay, I admit it. About once a night. Unless I'm trying to figure out something, like for my federal motion. Then I'll call them a couple of times. I get a lot of information from them. I don't have many books, especially law books, and I can't afford to keep running around town all the time, I don't have the money for that. More than anything, at night I'll think of some answer I want on the spur of the moment, and so I call the West Allis police department or the Milwaukee sheriffs or the F.B.I. Like the other night, I wanted to know whether or not Bronson La Follette is the state attorney general. And of course, I'll call them like when my phone is tapped or my apartment is broken into."

"Does that happen often?"

"Well, my phone is tapped all the time nowadays. But that's nothing new. It was the police that conspired with Marquette and the Teachers' Association to tap my telephone in 1967. And in April, when I was picked up by the police, my lock was changed and I had to get new keys from the landlord to get back into my own apartment. So now anyone can

come in any time they want." Alberta chuckles knowingly. "There's no point in my changing my lock again. They find one way after another to get in here.

"Just before Thanksgiving I bought six oranges to make cranberry relish. I left my apartment, and when I came back one orange was gone. Now you know very well if I go and tell the police that someone came into my apartment and stole one orange, well then they'll think I'm mentally ill." Alberta laughs. "But the police actually want me to go and tell them things like that. So I did tell the police and the F.B.I. about the orange. And about the half-pound of bacon that disappeared. I don't buy those luxuries very often because I can't afford them. So anyway, I told them. I said, 'If you're so hungry, go in and help yourself.' I haven't had anything touched since then.

"Sometimes the F.B.I. can be nice and sometimes they can be nasty. It seems they go in streaks. And same with the police. Once they told me to put aluminum foil around my wrists and around my ankles and go into the bathtub and stand on my head and turn the water on and see what happens. But sometimes when I call they can be just as nice as can be, some of them. The Waukeshaw police have been very nice, like tonight when they called."

"Didn't you feel they were taunting you?" I ask.

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes they are, a little bit. But I don't mind it unless they're threatening me." Alberta breathes a little faster here. "Like there was one police officer this last week who told me that I was going to be dying a fiery death. But they don't scare me any more. When I leave and they go into my apartment, that's so ordinary it doesn't even scare me any more. I don't say it doesn't just very

temporarily scare me. But I'm not scared in the way I used to be. At the same time, in a sense, you hurt when they do things like that. But I can't say that I'm scared the way I was, and I think they realize it now."

Alberta was evicted from her apartment on West Greenfield Street three years ago, for reasons she still can't quite fathom, and was pretty isolated for a long while after she moved to her place on 84th. Then she started making new friends. Until the rhubarb and tulip affair, she had stayed out of trouble (and North Division) for all three years at her present address. I ask her how her neighbors have reacted.

"They aren't really angry at me," Alberta replies. "Even Mr. Pickert, the neighbor where I took the tulips. I can see why he might have called the fire department, and I didn't say anything to him about it. I can see where if somebody's lying in the middle of the street, that could get me worried too. Of course, he didn't have to say I pulled his tulips."

Alberta points out the window, past filmy white curtains and the falling snow beyond. "But you know, the one across the street, Lila Johnson, she has been very hostile, even when she came to the hospital. She calls me once in a while and she'll be real nice, but all I have to do is say one word about mental hospitals and you can tell she feels I really belonged there that time. On one hand she says, well, she wants to be friends. But she keeps saying she doesn't want to ever see me do anything like that again. I told her I can't predict the future."

Alberta clears her throat. "If she doesn't want to be my friend, fine. It's up to her. But if she does,"--Alberta speaks slowly and deliberately now--"but if she does, then she'll have to accept me just exactly as I am. Because that's the way it has to be."

Alberta spent Thanksgiving Day by herself. "I really didn't do a lot of cooking because I was all alone and wanted to get a lot of work done on my federal motion. I did make that cranberry orange relish, but only just to freeze."

She guesses she'll spend Christmas in much the same way. Last year Alberta was invited to spend Christmas Eve at Vi Taras's house next door. "We were real friendly then," Alberta says, "but since this last time I got thrown in, you know, she hasn't wanted to associate with me."

Alberta is used to spending Christmas alone. Her four sisters live spread out through northern Wisconsin and Minnesota, where winter driving is treacherous, even if Alberta has the money to make the trip. Besides, she doesn't speak to them much anymore.

"I usually am here by myself, pretty much, on Christmas," Alberta says with the barest of sighs in her voice. "Because...because I figure Christmas is kind of a private day for people."


Jeffrey Steingarten