

# Never at Home

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To the memory of my mother, Helen.

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## Explanations Are Clear

She was the kind of woman who could get lost just two blocks from home. “Damn it, Corinne,” Alice would say in exasperation on the nights Corinne arrived home late, exhausted, and sometimes even bedraggled. “Is this really *necessary*?” But at other times—particularly those nights when Corinne came home almost (if not exactly) straight from work, Alice would dwell fondly on her darling’s facility, fully aware that they never would have met without it, such different worlds did they hail from.

“My mother named me for a woman of destiny,” Corinne liked to say, smiling as though the very idea of “destiny” was too old-fashioned for words.

Alice never complained seriously. If destiny—or something less passé—drove Corinne, well, that was part of her, too, and no more to be tampered with than Corinne’s love of fresh mint leaves. Certainly the demand that she assure Corinne’s freedom to wander, made early in the throes of intense infatuation, had startled Alice and made her look at Corinne with a searching gaze, since Corinne seemed the opposite of hard-nosed. As if to explain herself, Corinne had told a story of the cruelty of the fourth-grade teacher who kept her tied to her desk all the many long minutes class was in session. “The humiliation!” Alice had said, all sympathy. “Yes,” Corinne responded, “but worse was the fear she gave me of being trapped always in one place, stuck fast to a situation always and ever the same, restrained from movement,

forbidden difference, just because that's where authority says you're supposed to be."

Though Alice sympathized, she privately thought Corinne carried her indulgence of wanderlust to unnecessary extremes. *Some* wandering was good; otherwise you could never fully appreciate what you had. Getting lost as a matter of routine, though, was disruptive; indulged to an extreme, it must preclude stable relationships and love. But then Alice met Corinne's family, all affability and bluff good cheer, constantly cracking jokes, eager to make Alice feel at home with them all. "What a difficult child she was!" Marian Adams told Alice. "She simply would not stay put. Always wandering around, scaring the wits out of us, never doing what she was told. Even when we punished her by putting her in her room or making her sit in the corner, why I'd look around to check on her, and she'd be gone! For a while we even tried one of those leash arrangements, but when she got older, of course, the leash was utterly useless. It got to be a regular battle of wills between us. There's never been a more stubborn person in the world than my daughter. And oh! The trouble I had with other children's parents, when their precious little treasures would go off with Corinne on "adventures," as she called it. My advice is to watch out, dear, and not let her lead you one of her merry chases. Get her to settle down and appreciate what she's got, and we'll be forever grateful to you."

Alice felt outraged on her beloved's behalf, but rather than say so, she made a mighty effort to find out just why it was that Corinne found it necessary to wander. Was it simple boredom, perhaps, bolstered by habit? Or was it somehow necessary to her sense of identity? Though the very thought of it struck her as tedious and exhausting, she determined to get lost with Corinne, to see if she could learn just what the attraction was.

Alice tried. But when Corinne took the unexpected turn elsewhere, she somehow became not exactly a *stranger*, but distracted and distant and apparently indifferent to their intimacy. Alice clung to Corinne's arm, certain she'd lose her otherwise.



But when Corinne took the second turn, shrinking herself into a sleek brown moth sporting paisley wings gorgeously chestnut, taupe, and charcoal, and the finest and longest antennae, quivering with a myriad queries, Alice knew she could not follow. “Corinne,” she called as the moth fluttered on an updraft, “come back!” Alice fell sick with her sense of separation, sick with her own lack of courage. Quickly she retreated, making her way back home without trouble. Afterwards she remembered nothing of where she had been, only that Corinne had made herself strange—and ignored her.

Hours later Corinne returned with one eyebrow singed. “It’s nothing,” she said when Alice fussed over it, for injuries were one of the risks of her wandering, and the scars on her body a veritable catalog of their traces. Staring at the reddened flesh where Corinne’s eyebrow had been, Alice wallowed in desolation at her sense of how much there was about Corinne that she did not—and probably would not ever—understand. Tears welled in her eyes. Worried that Corinne would mistake the reason for her tears, she resisted them, but her heart was too strong, her pain too great, and one by one they paraded down her cheeks, testament of a power utterly beyond her.

Corinne held her close and said she loved her; she became almost as sad as Alice. Haltingly, she tried to explain. “I’m not an artist, not a writer. I don’t know how to convey to another person any of the things I experience, or even how my wanderings touch me. To wander, you have to let go, you have to become inattentive to everything familiar, have to let down the barriers that make home. When you came with me, I did that, and you couldn’t. If I hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t have gone anywhere, but just stayed home with you. Do you see?” Alice saw part of it, but the part she saw was the part that hurt, the part that was without the power to advance her understanding. Corinne tried again. “It’s not that I stop being me. Because you know, I’m never like anyone else when I’m wandering, I never really become like anybody or any thing around me, but only give up what’s familiar, which is what

allows me to *see*. It's hard to explain, I guess. I wish I could. But since I can't, you won't know what I mean unless you get lost yourself. It's just that kind of inexplicable thing. You know?" And then Corinne quoted Gertrude Stein's words, that "explanations are clear but since no one to whom a thing is explained can connect the explanations with what is really clear, therefore clear explanations are not clear."

Alice hated just about anything she'd ever heard that Gertrude Stein had said, even "A rose is a rose is a rose"; she felt frustrated rather than enlightened by the quote. She sniffled. "We're so much alike, and yet so different. And I like that you're so different; it's what drew me to you in the first place. But it hurts, that you can be *that* different. Darling, it *hurts*."

That difference scared Alice even more than it hurt her. It scared her to remember the moment when Corinne, disregarding her presence—maybe even forgetting the very fact that she existed—shrank herself into a moth, no longer recognizable as the woman she loved. What else does she become when she gets herself lost? Alice wondered. Other insects, reptiles, or amphibians? A toad, that no princess would ever dream of kissing? A *slug*, which was even lower than a worm?

Alice dried her tears and made soup. They didn't talk about it again. Corinne got lost as her inclination took her, and Alice forbore to remonstrate when she returned late and in less than mint condition. Their love was strong; their love was powerful. Their love respected the terms of the bargain bridging all they could not share between them.



After two years of their being in love and living together, Alice stopped watching for the end coming. She thought of their love as a magical kind of yeast, with Corinne as honey and herself as salt, dissolved in warm water and worked into flour, yielding a lively dough that kept expanding and expanding in its warm and

fragrant promise. Their quarrels—two big ones—were like great punches and kneadings, preventing the dough from getting deceptively large, limiting the size of its holes for the sake of its ultimate texture. She thought of love, too, as the smell of bread baking and as beautiful golden chunks of the stuff to be shared between them, fine, rich-crumbed loaves with magical powers of sustenance and replenishment, at once symbol, food, and constituent of their union.

And oh, Alice thought in frequent wonder, the power of such love! Every night, lying against Corinne's warm, sleeping back, her mouth just inches from Corinne's long, soft neck, as Alice breathed in that distinctive, heady scent, a thrill suffused her, a thrill as deep and physical as the thrills of sex, but a thrill that was part astonishment, part tenderness and pride, overwhelming her with the fact of her great good fortune and the sense that even if it were for only one more night, she was the luckiest woman alive. At such moments her diurnal insecurity faded into insignificance, so powerfully did her entire self's loving overwhelm her, and she felt as though she were love itself, a fullness so exhilarating that in merely giving her love—and herself—to Corinne, she had become intoxicated with its excess. At such moments all the fullness inside her burst and saturated her with its power. She would not risk even a whisper, lest she wake Corinne. But her mind teemed with expressions of love, so naked and uninhibited that though unleashed only at night, they worked on her in the daylight as well, gradually banishing her certainty that it was all just too good to be true.

Alice completely let go of her fears when Corinne agreed to move to another city with her, allowing Alice to accept an offer of a professional position in a chamber group. Alice was ecstatic. Not only would she be able to give up her day job and be paid to play music, but she had the gratification of knowing that Corinne, all because of their love, was willing to give up the security of her job and seek a new one in a place that was unknown to either of them. This was love! This was bliss! This was paradise!

And so it *was*.

Only a couple of months after they moved, Alice's parents begged them to come visit—both of them, together. It was as though, Alice thought, their moving to another city proved they were a couple in a way even her parents couldn't deny. Alice was nervous telling Corinne about the invitation. She gnawed her nails to the quick just contemplating it. But it was something, she knew, that was necessary. Her parents hadn't taken her seriously when she'd come out to them. They acted as though her lesbianism was just a passing phase, just something she was playing at, something young women up North sometimes did for a while. Alice guessed they got such ideas from sitcoms. Every idea they had of "the North" (which was just about everywhere in the country outside of the state of Louisiana) came from sitcoms. And though the priest said that lesbianism was a sin, because she was their daughter, and because people down there always took what the priests said with great pinches of salt (since hadn't they been claiming for decades that birth control was a sin, even though everyone but a handful of Baptists had been practicing it since anyone living could remember), they could accept her coming out—as long, that is, as she didn't "do any of that" when she was *home*. But since linking with Corinne, Alice had been firm: they were a couple. No Corinne, no Alice. Period.

Now Alice warned Corinne: "Everybody at home calls me *Alma*."

"Oh!" said Corinne, in an *isn't-that-interesting* tone of voice. And Alice saw that Corinne, a woman who had been becoming her named self all her life, didn't understand the implications of self-naming. No one, she thought, *could*—who hadn't taken that leap for herself. If Corinne's wanderings were a difference Alice could not know, Alice's self-naming was a difference Corinne could not know. Perhaps, Alice thought, Corinne would discover that on their visit south.



Before they could book their seats, they had to decide the length of their stay and whether Alice would take her instrument. The first decision was easy since Alice knew that her parents would consider any visit shorter than a week an insult, while any visit longer than a week would drive all of them—Alice, Corinne, and Alice’s parents—nuts. Making the second decision, though, cost Alice some restless, insomniac hours. One couldn’t safely check a double bass (or other instrument) as baggage, and no one in possession of a decent instrument would even consider doing so, which meant that taking her double bass would require booking a seat for it and renting a station wagon or a van instead of a compact in New Orleans. When Alice explained her dilemma to Corinne, Corinne took Alice’s hands, one in each of hers, and slowly turned them over and over, admiring them with her gaze and her touch, as if to tell Alice that she had always seen in their size and shape the power and control she always heard in Alice’s sound, and that she saw in them, too, the grace and passion that Alice’s instrument, lying on its side in the dining room, conveyed even when silent. “How can you even *think* of going a week without playing?” she said, looking into Alice’s eyes, baffled with a sadness that caught at Alice’s throat.

It was Alice, not Alma, who was the professional musician. And when Alice went home, everyone said she was Alma and refused to recognize the Alice in her.

“I-I...” Alice felt a panicked confusion. A whole week without playing? Unthinkable! And yet, there was something about going home... “It will be so hot,” Alice said. “You can have no idea. Even with the air-conditioning running full blast, my fingers will slip and slide with sweat, and my poor tortured ax will swell up with the humidity, its strings unable to hold their tension, its body ready to burst out of its lacquer finish, all the while under dread of being attacked by mold and mildew. My parents live at the edge of a swamp, Corinne!”

Corinne sighed. “Does that mean you’re going to go a week without playing?”

Alice’s stomach felt heavy with anxiety. She thought she might throw up. “No. Because you’re right. I *can’t* go a week without playing. I guess I’ll be booking us three tickets after all.”

Corinne looked over Alice’s shoulder at the great lovely curves of the instrument. “It’s best to pick one’s sacrifices carefully,” she said. “Because sacrifices have a way of determining the shape of one’s life, don’t they.”

Alice was surprised. She had never thought of it that way.



It took them just under three hours to cover the distance from the airport to Alice’s parents’ house. While Alice drove, Corinne feasted her gaze on the strangeness of the passing landscape, so visibly enchanted that Alice began to worry about the possibility of Corinne pursuing its more active exploration. Would a recital of the many insects and dangerous reptiles occupying the local ecology deter her from meandering? Or would it simply encourage her? The egrets and pelicans utterly delighted her, and the dark mystery of the swamps they literally traversed, particularly the Atchafalya Basin...well. “So much still, dark water,” Corinne said repeatedly. “So different from mountain rivers! So...murky.”

“So mosquito- and snake-filled,” Alice muttered.

“And the names! So glamorous! Whiskey Bay, Bayou Des Glaices, Lake Fausse Pointe, Grosse Tete—”

Alice interrupted. “Grosse Tete? What’s so glamorous about that? It means Big Head, or maybe even Fat Head, if you want to get colloquial about it.”

Corinne grinned. “French just does that to me, you know?”

“Then you’ll love my parents. Though their English isn’t quite up to standard, it sure is full of bits and pieces of the local

version of French—which isn't anything someone from France would acknowledge, much less understand.”

Alice had never thought twice about those place names, anymore than she'd thought about people's names. They always, simply, had been there. What she *did* notice, though, from the very moment she got off the plane, even while they were still in the terminal, was the smell. Nothing smelled like the air of southern Louisiana. A deep, pervasive scent of rot, she had once heard a tourist describe it. Whatever it was, she loved it. It was the most familiar and comfortable scent in the world to her. It was partly what she went home for. It was imprinted in her brain, she thought, as the smell that air should be, a smell that could never be found anywhere else in the world. Corinne hadn't mentioned noticing it yet, only the inescapable pressure of the heat and humidity for those few seconds they were out in it.

As she drove the last few miles, Alice grew giddy with tension. She pictured her mother waiting in the front room, watching for their car, a gumbo simmering in the kitchen, a case of Michelob in the refrigerator. Her father would be late, coming home after twelve days offshore (twelve days on, five days off, was his schedule, hard at his age, but at good pay). “It's not really a proper town at all,” Alice said as they passed the (volunteer) fire house. It boasted a handful of trailers and wood-framed houses from which most of the paint had peeled, a small grocery, two churches, and three bars. No city hall. No police department or public library, no school or post office, no medical facilities. People went to other towns or the parish seat for all of that. Modena (pronounced MOE-de-nah) didn't even rate a mention on most road maps. And it was the end of its road. After Modena, there was the Atchafalya Basin, period. No one just “passed through” Modena; either they came *to* Modena, or they ran out of road and were forced to turn around and go back the way they had come.

Alice's parents lived about fifty yards from the end of the road. As she slowed to turn into the driveway, she saw that the neighbors' trailer was now a burned-out shell, though a half-dozen

defunct old cars still littered its lot. The cars had been their children's rooms, one per child for children over the age of eleven, and two or three children per car for the younger ones. There was no sign of the children or parents now.

Alice's mother was out of the house before Alice even got her door open. Her hair was grayer, she had more lines in her face, and she looked a little thinner, but the flowered polyester shirt and black stretch pants were as familiar to Alice as the smell of the air, as the wet heat that clung to her body the instant she got out of the car. Her mother offered her a cheek, but Alice hugged her tightly and breathed in the same scent her mother had always had, a mixture of Secret Deodorant, lipstick, face powder, and cigarette smoke (which meant, Alice thought, that her mother hadn't quit smoking after all). "So y'all made it safe, cher," she said. "I'm so glad, yeah. You know how nervous those planes make me."

Alice drew her mother around to the other side of the car where Corinne stood waiting. "Mama, this is Corinne. Corinne, this is Cecilia Dugas."

Corinne shook hands and said "I'm so happy to meet you, Mrs. Dugas."

"Mais that's alright, cher," Alice's mother said. "Even though you're not from around here, you can call me Miss Cecilia if you want, which is how Alma's friends have always named me." Alice thought of how she called Corinne's parents Marian and Joe. Totally different worlds, yes. Not to mention her mother's dropping the *esses* on her plurals, and pronouncing her *ths* like *ds* or *zs*, which Alice, conscious of Corinne's foreign ear, noticed as she had almost never done in her life.

"So I see the Smiths' trailer burned down. What is all that about, Mama?" Alice said as she opened the back of the station wagon. She pronounced "Smiths'" as *Smit'*, as everyone else in the neighborhood did.

"Cor, cher! You brought that big old fiddle all the way down here? So you still fouyaying with that thing? You know, I never



did think that was right, such a big fiddle for a girl. I never have unnerstan' why you don' play a regular fiddle, something more your right size." She smiled at Corinne. "Talk about stubborn!" Her voice rose on a high, melodic arc. "No one could never tell that girl anything! Like some dogs, you know, that have to get the biggest stick they can find to carry, even if it's a tree branch knocked down by the wind!"

Alice lifted her bass out onto the oyster-shell gravel. "The Smiths, Mama," she said sharply, pronouncing it the northern way. "What happened to the Smiths?"

"Oh, that's a tale in itself, yeah" her mother said, reaching for one of the suitcases. They went into the house, which felt cool after the heat. Alice dragged her bass over the faded gold nylon pile rug and laid it down on its side near the table. "So this suitcase, who that for?" Alice's mother asked, leading the way to the bedrooms.

"That one's mine, Miss Cecilia," Corinne said.

"I'll put it in the boys' room," she said, moving ahead of them into the room that had been Alice's brothers'. Alice and Corinne exchanged looks. Alice's mother turned. "And Alma, you'll stay in your old room." Her gray eyebrows came down into a mild frown as her dark brown eyes looked seriously into Alice's face.

Alice went stiff with tension. "I know, I know, and this is your house, Mama." She took her suitcase from Corinne and set it inside the door of her old room. "We understand that." She smiled tightly. "Just like we'd never let anyone smoke in *our* house, either."

Alice's mother looked warily puzzled, but only said, "Y'all probably starving. We got some lemonade, Coke, and Michelob. And there's okra gumbo I made just today."

The three of them sat around the kitchen table sipping beer while a batch of frozen Hot Bread, which Alice's mother always served with gumbo, baked. The window unit in the living room didn't cool the kitchen much, so they sipped fast. After they'd

exhausted the subjects of the flight and drive, Alice rested her folded arms on the table and demanded the Smiths' tale.

Alice's mother reached to the window ledge behind her chair for her cigarettes, an ashtray, and the "smoke-eater" she swore made the air smoke-free. "It would be a better story, cher, if I knew the whole thing. But it's not all that bad a story as it is, I don't think. Mais, you remember that oldest boy, the one they call 'Boy'? Not Junior, the little pishant with canaille eyes, no, but Boy?"

"Yes, Mama," Alice said impatiently, watching her mother put a cigarette in her mouth. "The kid who always wore that dirty old Astro's baseball cap. I *know* the one you mean."

Her mother flicked her Bic and lit the cigarette. "Yeah, that's the boy," she said, puffing. She lowered the burning cigarette to the ashtray. "You know that fellow, that used to live over to Co-teau Holmes, who repaired roofs and busted pipes in the winter? Bobby Oubre?" (She pronounced "Bobby" Bah-BEE.) "So one day, that Bobby Oubre, he finds Boy foyuyaying around outside Mr. Jules' tavern. 'Hey, kid,' he says to him, 'why you always hanging around this place, like you ain't got nothing better to do?' And then Bobby Oubre told Boy he could go to work for him. Minimum wage and all. Which was a good deal for someone like that Boy." She looked up at Corinne. "Oh, cher, I'm sorry, you probably don't know who all these people are, unless Alma done told you?"

Corinne, smiling, shook her head.

So Alice's mother blew smoke at the smoke-eater and leisurely described the Smiths' living arrangements—complaining all the while about how people like the Smiths' gave cajuns who lived near the levy a bad name.

"Just tell the story, Mama," Alice said. Her hair was already soaked with sweat. And despite the smoke-eater, the smoke was irritating her sinuses and throat. It was an old, familiar combination, she thought. Cigarette smoke in her eyes and throat and sweat rolling in fat drops, down into the crack between her breasts.

She pressed her hands to the sweating beer bottle and found that it was now about the same temperature as her fingers.

“You’re worse, girl, than ever, with your rudeness,” her mother said calmly. She took a long, slow drag on her cigarette before continuing. “So Boy went to work for Bobby Oubre. It was well known that Bobby had to teach that child how to do every thing, even how to use a ruler! And he’d have to come over here, most days, to get that boy out of the car he was sleeping in, to get him to go to work. Cor! And then that boy was always having accidents, yeah. Mais, he even fell off of a roof one day, it was Mister Glen Olivier’s roof, I believe.” She shook her head. “I guess either Bobby has a big heart, or else he was profiting somehow by Boy’s labor, though truly, that’s so hard to believe, yeah.”

The tale Alice’s mother told turned on the appearance one night of a mysterious stranger driving a “big fancy car, like the manager at my work he drives” boasting a loud, booming stereo. T’ Hoss, Boy’s father, came out of his trailer and confronted the stranger, “and in less time than it takes to peel a crawfish, him and the driver, they was getting all aggressive like, both of them shouting, and T’ Hoss making fists and shoving his face down at the driver, and the driver opening his door and jumping out of that car like some big, mean giant jack-in the box, I mean he was *big*, y’all, I don’t think I ain’t never seen a man that big!” T’ Hoss backed off. “Mais me, I didn’t know T’ Hoss was that smart,” she said in her best woman-to-woman style. There were words, and then the car roared off, trailing the BOOM—BOOM—BOOM of its stereo. Later, there had been words between Boy and T’ Hoss, culminating in *Boy’s* driving off, perhaps to Miss Mag’s House, where cash, not age, mattered. The big fancy car returned the next night. T’ Hoss and the driver talked only briefly. Later that night, the sound of windows exploding woke Alice’s mother to an ugly stench of smoke. Peering through the crack in her curtains, she saw flames pouring out of the trailer and called the volunteer fire department. Next day she had it from the sheriff that the Smiths had probably burned down their trailer and taken

a powder. “They had some kind of arrangement with Mr. Fred Thibodeaux, you know, paying him rent in game and like that. Anyways, the sheriff he said he wouldn’t be surprised if they was all out in the Basin somewheres. They live off the Basin anyways, hunting and fishing and like that, and scavenging their clothes and all, that Boy being the only one of them that ever tried to hold a steady job, yeah.”

Alice swallowed the last of her beer. “Anybody else want another?” she asked, tapping the empty bottle.

“I do,” Corinne said, but Alice’s mother replied that she was still working on the first one.

Alice went to the refrigerator. “So go on,” she said, lingering in the lovely cool air that greeted her when she opened the door.

“That’s it, cher. That’s the story.”

Alice slammed the door shut and brought the cold beers back to the table. “Whaddaya mean, that’s the story?” she said irritably, handing one of the bottles to Corinne. “You haven’t finished it.” She lifted her tee-shirt to the neck of the bottle she’d kept for herself and twisted the cap off.

“Whaddaya want to know, cher? That they all lived happily ever after?”

Alice glared at her mother, glared at the mass of wrinkles gleaming with sweat in her thin, almost gaunt, bony face. “Well what was the deal with the dude in the big car, for one. And why’d the Smiths burn down their own home?”

Alice’s mother shook her head. “Mais that’s all open to speculation, cher. I’m no private detective, me. Daddy thinks, though, that Boy somehow owed a lot of money to some body who sent that big old man out to shake him down, like. And that the Smiths decided they better get out of there fast, and maybe, being so dumb as they are, they thought they were covering their tracks by burning their trailer down.” She took a sip of beer and laughed. “Who can tell with people like them, eh? Why, I bet an alligator or a possum would know their minds better than any civilized person!”

Alice expelled her breath in a huff. “I can’t believe I let you do this to me again, Mama.” She looked at Corinne. “It’s just so typical, yass. Telling stories she don’t have the facts to, as if she did. And then leaving everyone hanging in the end.”

Alice’s mother laughed loudly and winked at Corinne. “Alma, she always wants to know all the answers to everything. As if that’s the way life ever tells its stories!”

Alice glowered at her mother—who exchanged grins with Corinne. Then Corinne looked at Alice, and one of her deep, slow smiles, radiant with love, spread over her face. Alice’s shoulders loosened. She noticed the shine of sweat in the vee of Corinne’s shirt and knew that Corinne must be as sweaty as she was. She thought of how slick Corinne’s breasts would be, trapped like her own in a bra, and creamed in her pants. And looking deep into Corinne’s eyes, she knew that Corinne was reading her desire.

Alice’s mother scraped her chair back and left the table. Alice swallowed on a suddenly parched throat and took a big hit of beer. “Time to set the table,” her mother said in a strained, high-pitched voice. It was all right, Alice thought, as long as her mother could think of them as “the girls,” meaning something like best friends in the language of childhood. But the reality, which she hadn’t yet taken in, much less accepted—that was something she had yet to reckon with.



Alice woke to the smell of Community coffee, dark roast, and to the shrill noise of blue jays, their calls as flat and long and sharp as their tail feathers—the quintessential sound, in memory, of her childhood. She had gotten used to the long involved songs of robins, the paltry cheeps of sparrows, the raucous shrieks of crows. But this sound, this sound alone was the sound that birds made in her dreams.

When she went out to the kitchen to get herself a cup of coffee and to pour another to take to Corinne (as she did every

morning), she found her father already up, sitting at the table, smoking and reading the *Teche News*. “Morning, Daddy!” she said, bending to peck him on the cheek.

“Hey, Alma!” He grinned at her. “Mais baby girl, you still so skinny? Guess those Yankees just don’t know how to eat up there, yeah?”

Alice poured herself a cup of coffee, then, braving the thickness of cigarette smoke saturating the air, sat down at the table. “You must have gotten in real late last night. I thought for sure you’d be sleeping in.”

His thick, red-knuckled fingers stubbed out his cigarette. “My body has this clock innit, cher, you know? And the one thing I can’t stand, is laying there of a morning, waiting for it to get a little later, when I know I ain’t anyways going back to sleep.”

They sipped coffee and carefully asked one another obvious questions—he about her trip, she about working offshore in the Gulf. A deep shyness had been between them for years, since she’d been thirteen. Their relationship might have been easier if she’d had sisters, but basically, she thought, he was somehow afraid of her being a woman. Something about it made him uneasy, worried him, as if it were fraught with strange perils and lurking danger he did not want to think about.

“Mama said y’all were planning to go rodeying today,” he said into the first silence.

Alice perked up. “I thought we could go visit Aunt Juliette, and maybe Uncle Preacher, see the sights in St. Martinville and maybe have lunch in New Iberia, and then, if there’s time—otherwise, we could do it another day—go to Avery Island. Maybe it’s not that pretty this time of year, but it’s still one of the local tourist sights, yeah.”

“Uncle Preacher, he’s had a quadruple bypass, did Mama tell you? Not two months ago, if I’m not mistaken.”

They talked some about that, and Alice finished her coffee, then got up from the table and said she was going to take Corinne a cup. She was careful not to look at him as she said this.

She was afraid to ruffle the surface; she knew that the smooth veneer of their relations could crack at the slightest pressure. They would all have to be very, very careful, she thought. She wouldn't call them on their racist remarks, and they wouldn't get ugly with homophobia. She hoped.



They drove the back roads with the music of Clifton Chenier—Corinne's choice—thumping loudly on the radio. A CD of Purcell concerti—Alice's choice—lay in the tray between their seats. Everything she saw utterly charmed Corinne. Anything that was not charming, Alice thought dryly, Corinne apparently did not see. "It's like being in another century, almost," she said any number of times. "If it weren't for cars..."

"And ATMs, video rentals, severe toxic, chemical pollution, Walmart, and drive-in daiquiri stands," Alice said. "Isn't just about every place like every other place these days? What's different is the heat and the higher level of illiteracy."

But when playing tourist, getting romantic about "Acadiana" was *de rigueur*. Why else get down from the car in St. Martinville to look at a live oak on the banks of the Bayou Teche that Eugene Duchamp, a 19th-century landowner, filled with cement (after first claiming it in the name of Emmeline Labiche, whom Longfellow had renamed Evangeline)?

About Alice's mother, Corinne said, "I just love to hear her talk. Her voice is so *melodic*, something to do, I guess, with the way the syllables get accented so differently. And then the consonants are so softened, and muted, and *flowing*. Also, there's something about the way she—and you, too, by the way, when you're talking with her or your father—there's something about the way y'all *push* on your vowels. With a kind of emphasis that makes them sound totally different."

“You can do it too,” Alice said, braking to accommodate a tractor in the road ahead. “Just open your mouth really, really, wide, and you, too, can sound like a cajun.”

“It’s funny,” Corinne said as they crawled along while waiting for a break in the traffic. “I keep thinking that’s corn out there, but then I do a double-take, because of course sugar cane isn’t at all like corn, except that it grows in rows and is tall and green. It’s so...*lush*. And of course the soil’s the wrong color. To be like the Midwest, I mean.”

Alice pulled out into the left lane and accelerated past the tractor. She said, “I once heard somebody say that when he was living in Illinois he would sit out in his back yard and pretend the cornfield behind his house was ocean.”

Corinne leaned over and squeezed Alice’s knee. “Well, Miss Alma. Although your Uncle Preacher was surely as boring as you said he would be, everything else has been a lot more interesting than you claimed.”

Alice sighed. “Wait until you’ve been here a day or two more. *Then* tell me it isn’t as dull as ditchwater.”

“Your parents didn’t tell your relatives about us, did they,” Corinne said.

Alice shrugged. “I don’t suppose they did. Certainly not Uncle Preacher—or we would’ve known it.”

One step at a time, Alice thought. Especially in August, when life in southern Louisiana was not much livelier than death.



It was Sunday afternoon, in the middle of the family barbecue, that Alice first noticed the change in Corinne. She had been feeling something slightly off between them, if not *wrong*—an odd distance, which she had been telling herself had to do with the strangeness of their circumstances and her own sense of physical separation, compounded by Corinne’s having decided that not only should Alice not creep into her bed to secretly



spend the night with her, but that they shouldn't even cuddle and hug. Alice didn't understand Corinne's reasons, and Corinne didn't really try to explain them—even when they were out in the car, out of possible earshot of Alice's parents. Since Alice had long been aware that she had a problem with rejection, and since she knew Corinne loved her, she had been doing her best not to think about the strangeness.

The first weird moment of shock struck when Alice was standing talking to her sister-in-law, Susan. They were out of doors, sweating under the live oak that shaded most of the back yard, escaping the smoke of the many cigarettes that were burning in the house. Susan, a respiratory therapist from Texas, was talking about how frustrated she was in her efforts to get Albert to stop smoking. "He's a real lamb about it, he never smokes in the house," she said in her thick Texan drawl. "But I think of all the resuscitations he's done, and I just don't understand it. It's not like he doesn't *know*." Albert was a paramedic in Lafayette. "Sometimes I wonder if it's something about being cajun." A guilty smirk stole over her face. "But then I think of you, Alma, and I know that's a lot of bull-hooley." They laughed. "But speaking of cajuns, how did you happen to meet Corinne up North? It must have been some coincidence, to find you were both from this neck of the woods."

Alice blinked. "What do you mean? Corinne's not from around here. She's from Indiana." She grinned slyly and nudged Susan with her elbow. "What, you t'ink everybody not from Texas soun' alike, cher?"

Susan looked puzzled. "Seriously, Alma. She talks just like one of you!"

Alice thought of Corinne's fascinated remark the previous afternoon when they were driving to Portage to buy boiled shrimp from the wife of a shrimper, that she found herself hanging on people's words, to see which syllable they'd put the stress on. "I just can't figure out a system to it," she'd said.

At that moment Corinne opened the back door and came out to them, a sweating bottle of Michelob in hand. Alice looked at her—seriously *looked* at her—as she walked toward them and got the scare of her life. Corinne was the right height, the right shape, and had the right set of movements and posture. But her complexion and hair had darkened. Her eyes were velvety brown rather than green. And her face was a dead-ringer for Alice’s Aunt Filene’s, say twenty years back.

When Corinne reached them, she said, “Miss Cecilia has all d’ air-conditioner’ goin’ full blast, only dey just can’t keep up. Mais, it’s almos’ cooler out here!”

Susan shot Alice a look brimming with curiosity. “Susan,” Alice said, taking Corinne’s arm by the elbow, “would you excuse us? Corinne and I are going to walk up the road a bit, so I can show her the Smiths’ burnt-out trailer.”

“Sounds exciting,” Susan said drily. “But don’t go too far, since it’s just about time for the daily downpour.”

Alice glanced up at the heavy gray sky. It almost always felt like it was about to rain. But it usually *did* rain most August afternoons.

Ruthlessly, Alice dragged Corinne along, to the lot next door. “Alma!” Corinne said, protesting the sweat-slicked grip on her arm, but Alice held on. Her stomach was heaving so violently she thought she might be sick. Repeatedly she snatched quick looks at the side of Corinne’s face, each time recoiling in shock, then looking again, looking for the *real* Corinne. She said, “What have you done to your face?” Her voice was sobbing. “Corinne, talk to me. Tell me what the fuck’s going on!”

Corinne, again calling her *Alma*, protested Alice’s dragging her off from the family, since as Alice knew full well, everyone there was bound to notice.

“Goddam it, Corinne, stop talking that way! Christ, you must be some great mimic, when only two nights ago you asked me what was that my mother kept saying, you couldn’t believe

she was calling me *shit*. And now you say *cher* exactly as she does, as if you'd learned to do it at your mother's knee!"

They scuffed through brownish old pine needles and tiny acorns and reddish dust. When they reached the first of the old cars the Smith children had slept in, an ancient Plymouth, rusted and moldy, with great clumps of Spanish moss packed into the corners of the back-seat, Alice pointed at the mildew-spotted side mirror (one of the few mirrors of any of the old cars still intact) and said, "Look at your face, Corinne." Corinne snorted and said she knew very well what her own face looked like, she didn't have to look. "*Look! Look!* So that you can see that you're not *you* anymore!"

Corinne muttered something about "foolishness" but grabbed hold of the mirror and turned it up so that she could look down into it. "Ye'h," she said impatiently. "So jus' what is it I'm s'posed to be seein', cher?"

The question terrified Alice. Her voice shook. "Do you recognize that face in d' mirror?"

Corinne frowned at her. "Acourse I do. Don' mos' people recognize demselves when dey look in d' mirror?"

A wave of cold swept over Alice, making her muscles tremble and her teeth chatter. Though every person could be pegged by their speech to a particular town (or even section of town), every individual in Southwest Louisiana had a personally idiosyncratic way of speaking. Not only did Corinne get it all exactly right, even a word like *mirror*, but Alice now recognized the individual style as peculiarly Aunt Filene's—though Aunt Filene lived in Abbeville and Corinne had never met her. Even the way Corinne was holding her head was just like the way Aunt Filene did. Like an aggressive bird, waiting to pounce on its prey, Alice thought. "It's like you've been possessed by Aunt Filene," Alice said slowly. She took hold of Corinne's hand—hot in comparison with her own—and stared at it. *It*, at least, still seemed to be Corinne's. But for how long? "I don't suppose you have your wallet on you," Alice said. "Because I'd just like you to take a look

at your driver's license, and then compare that to what you see in the mirror. There's *such* a difference that I don't believe they'd let you board the flight back, looking the way you do now."

Corinne looked puzzled.

Alice's voice sharpened. "Does the face in the mirror look at all like the WASP we know Corinne Adams was born and raised as?" Alice slapped her own forehead. "Oh Christ. Oh Christ. I see it now. You're *lost!*"

It was like going native Big Time, Alice thought bitterly. She had to get Corinne *away*, so that she could find her old self, which it seemed she couldn't do now. "I think we should drive to New Orleans *tonight*," she said. "This place is dangerous for you. Why, you don't even know who you are anymore, do you?" Tears slid down Alice's cheeks, scalding and salty on her lips. She put her arms around Corinne and drew her close.

Corinne broke away. "Alma!" she said fiercely. "Anyone could see us!"

"So?" Alice blazed at her. "Why should you mind anyone *seeing* us? Everyone in that house knows we're lovers! It surely wouldn't come as a surprise to see us acting like it!"

Thunder rumbled in the distance. "I'm goin' back, cher. It'll be pourin' any second," Corinne said. Alice stared through her tears at the sight of her lover running back to the house, away from her, away, Alice thought, from their love, away from the woman Alice had always known her to be. What a nightmare. Corinne was lost—or rather, had lost herself—and she didn't even know it. As if, having turned into a pretty brown moth, she had forgotten what it was to be human and so would never be coming home again.



Alice got up Monday morning to find her mother long gone to the underwear factory, where she worked the seven-to-three shift, inspecting and folding long underwear, and her father

packing the back of his pick-up truck with a row boat, two large coolers, and his fishing tackle. When Alice greeted him, he invited her and Corinne to go fishing with him. Alice grew wistful—even nostalgic—with memories of their past trips in the Basin, some of them overnight. But the thought of Corinne out there scared her breathless. So she declined his offer and waved him out of the driveway, then poured herself a cup of coffee and sadly, mechanically unbagged her bass.

After tightening her bow and drawing it across its hunk of rosin, Alice glanced around her, sighed, and laid the bow down on the table. Maybe, she thought, with the two of them alone in the house, Corinne would wake as herself. Surely that was possible. And then Corinne's transformation into a copy of Aunt Filene would become first a nightmare safely past, and later a joke, to be mutually enjoyed in private, a wry tale of love's hazards and ultimate triumph...

The painful ache of loss drove Alice to Corinne's room. Corinne *had* to be back, she just had to have found her way home to herself. Alice needed her so badly, needed just to know that Corinne was again Corinne.

Alice stood near the head of the bed and studied the sleeping woman. She seemed caught in a heavy, exhausted sleep. As though, Alice thought, being lost was the hardest labor a person could pull. Her eyeballs moved rapidly under strangely purpled lids. The weight in Alice's stomach grew heavier. In sleep, this woman's features looked a little less like Aunt Filene's, but they were in no way recognizable as her lover's.

The blower on the window unit abruptly cut off, dropping the room into a sudden, dense stillness. The flat pointed notes of a pair of blue jays penetrated the hush. It was not a nightmare and it wasn't past, Alice thought desolately. Quietly she closed the door, then went out into the living room and held her bass. It's finally happened, she thought, what I knew must one day come to pass. I've lost my love in a place where love cannot be. Oh love, love, please come back to me. Please, please come back.



Though Alice could not concentrate enough even to tune her bass to the A she repeatedly puffed on her pitch pipe, staring at the rack of tacky knickknacks on the wall—an entire row of crawfish in every kitschy incarnation anyone had ever thought of, and a second row of classic cajuns playing a fiddle, dancing, swilling moonshine, visiting the outhouse, and clenching a corn-cob pipe—she did manage to devise a plan. Corinne had refused to drive to New Orleans with her on the grounds that doing so would be “unspeakably rude” (one of Aunt Filene’s favorite phrases, as it happened). But going to the mall in Lafayette, Alice thought, might be sufficiently reminiscent of their ordinary reality that she would realize she had gone native. If she rightly recalled, there was a Starbucks in that mall. Hell, with one good double tall latte the frog was bound to turn back into a princess! A kiss, after all, wasn’t going to do it, since last night Corinne had made it plain that she didn’t want Alice’s lips anywhere near her own—or rather Aunt Filene’s.

But Corinne had her own plans. As soon as she was up and dressed, she announced she wanted to drive over to Abbeville to visit a whole slew of Alice’s mother’s relatives. The mall, she *scorned!* And wasn’t there some woman in Loreauville who had seen the Virgin in her screen door? Janet, Marcel’s wife, had mentioned that it was her own mother’s neighbor who was the person in question, and had some kind of vigil going in her front yard, and wouldn’t it be really something to witness with their own eyes?

Alice stared dumbly at the woman her lover had become. Catholicism, now, too? Was it possible? The bile of rage surged into Alice’s throat. How dare she do this to her? How dare she turn into a repulsive, infuriating stranger?

Alice knew that this Filene-Corinne creature wouldn’t be impressed by anger. (No, she’d likely turn *suspicious*.) All guile and sweetness and light, keeping her hands and terms of endear-

ment strictly to herself, Alice said, "I suppose we could drive over there today. I mean, we are on vacation. But you know, since we didn't get to Avery Island on Saturday, I was thinking we might go there first. I know how much you liked all the birds we saw on the drive from New Orleans. Well, Avery Island has more birds than a field of sugar cane has calories. And it's not that far from Abbeville, either." Anywhere, Alice thought, but Loreauville. And Avery Island was a tourist spot. If their being alone wasn't enough to snap Corinne back, maybe hearing non-cajun voices would do the trick.

Though Corinne was not exactly eager to visit Avery Island, she went along with it for the sake of the Virgin-in-the-screen-door. Alice played Pergolesi on the CD-player; neither of them spoke even once. Corinne seemed to be a great deal less interested in the scenery than she had been on Saturday, as though it was too, too familiar to inspire anything in her but boredom. And though Alice glanced at Corinne often, not one look of love passed between them. It was, she thought, like riding with a stranger. She couldn't begin to guess what might be going through the other woman's head.

Avery Island was swarming with tourists with cameras and children screaming to feed the alligators, offering a plethora of accents, most of them Yankee. Alice and Corinne strolled about the gardens, sweating and languid, through the azaleas, pausing to rest on a bench near the Buddha, until they came, finally, to the water's edge, where they stopped to watch the birds and alligators. Corinne dabbed genteelly at her face with a carefully folded tissue to mop her perspiration. Alice realized that their simply being around non-cajuns would not suffice. What she needed to do, she thought, was weave a web of memories and associations that Corinne would be unable to resist.

Alice leaned against the railing and gazed at the alligator only a few yards away. Without looking at Corinne, she hummed a verse of their song. Halfway through, she stole a look and saw Corinne watching a little boy throwing chunks of Evangeline

Bread and loud encouragement at another alligator. Even Corinne's posture had become Aunt Filene's, that old-looking hunch of her shoulders, that furtive, darting mien. Alice couldn't bear to look at her. Even the alligator, she thought, was prettier. When she finished the verse, she said, "Hey! I just realized we forgot to bring the camera." On all their previous trips they had taken cute pictures of one another and had asked strangers to take pictures of the two of them together, because they always had so much fun afterward, remembering the sorts of little details that became more enjoyable in reminiscence than they'd been in real time. Alice managed a strained smile. "He's pretty cute, isn't he. Reminds me of little Robby, your sister's kid. Don't you think?" Had Corinne even heard her? "I think Abbie's right, your mother does favor him over her other grandchildren. You can hear it in her voice when she says *that little rascal*. It really pisses Abbie off, makes her feel slighted. I suppose it galls her, knowing that your mother finds her kids just too, too perfect with all their accomplishments and superior social skills, and Robby, loud and rude as he is, a cute little rogue with no inhibitions about saying the most entertaining things."

Corinne stared at her as if something was puzzling and troubling her.

"You do remember your mother, don't you, Corinne?" Alice said softly. "It's the craziest thing, Marian told me your favorite sandwich as a kid was peanut butter and horseradish. I know I'm pretty hard on her, because of all the stories you've told me about the things she and Joe did to stop your wandering off, but you never gave her up, did you. In your heart, you're still that daughter, however much that hurts you. Aren't you, Corinne?"

Corinne's—or Aunt Filene's—face took on the lineaments of utter panic. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, that face again became Corinne's own. But in her luminous, sea green eyes lurked a terrible horror.



Alice was jubilant. “Oh love, oh love, you’re you again!” she cried. “You don’t know how scared I’ve been, afraid you’d never find your way back.”

Corinne clutched her throat. Her gaze fixed on Alice’s. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m really, really sorry. How could I... But you can see, you can see that it’s...”

Alice opened her arms both to claim and to comfort her. But before she could close them around her beloved, Corinne ceased to be there. An enormous, iridescently blue-feathered bird hovered before Alice’s eyes. Flapping loudly, it lifted first laboriously, then gracefully up into the air. Alice put her hand to her heart, the center of a pain she thought would suffocate her. “No! Corinne, come *back!*” The bird circled over the water and glided elegantly low, to light on a log well away from the bank. Alice put her hand over her mouth to contain the screams straining at her throat. The bird dipped its beak into the water and drank, then suddenly was gone, replaced, it seemed, by a log aslant the log already there. Slowly the new log rolled off, into the water. Alice strained to see where it was floating to, strained to keep it distinguished from the many other logs floating about in the water.

And then she saw that the log was an alligator as suddenly as one did see such things in such murky brown water. Alice wondered if she could be sure it was Corinne, and she knew she could not. Corinne, wandering, could be anywhere. She could be a water lily, or an insect, or a water moccasin, hidden in the opaque depths of the water. Alice sagged onto a bench; inadequately concealed by her sunglasses but oblivious to the tourists around her, she wept.

She had to stay, of course, in case Corinne came back. But since there was no way now she could reach her, Alice’s wait was a helpless one.



Alice left Avery Island when dusk fell. Wrung out by hours of exposure to the humid heat and hours of hopeless waiting, she felt herself a hollow woman, numb and empty, void very nearly of life. For hours she had mouthed a silent prayer to Corinne to come back, for hours she had asked herself why Corinne, returned to herself, had departed so precipitously. Her last sight of her love, of eyes that had become unfathomable pools of horror, tormented her almost more than her helplessness. She had never understood Corinne's need to wander, had never understood even how she did it. Perhaps Corinne hadn't realized she could get lost without conscious volition, and that was the source of her horror? Or could it be a sense of not being anyone in particular, or not ever really being home, and finally realizing it? But she *was* home with me, Alice thought. I *know* she was.



Alice never got the ending or the whys of Corinne's story any more than she had gotten them in the case of the Smiths'. Her heart broken, she left Modena with her bass, with her memories, with her pain. She never did see Corinne again, though for years every living creature she saw, whether moths, butterflies, or tadpoles, made her think of Corinne and wonder what world she might be wandering in now.

[Gertrude Stein Quote on p. 4 from *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), Chapter 3]