

FOR RITA, WHO IS NEVER ALICE

Ann Patchett, award winner

ALICE IS THE woman I'd been with, the one who left in the last part of March. "I've been trying to think of what I know," she said one Sunday, sitting on the edge of the dresser. "One thing, anything, I could stand up in front of a group of people and be an authority on." I rolled over on my stomach and looked at her; she was shaking her ankles back and forth. "I can't think of a single thing."

"Does it matter?"

"No, I guess not, but think about it, what do you really know about?"

"Gin," I said without hesitation, "gin I know." I picked up a damp glass from the night table and rolled it around in my palms. "I can give you arguments for lemons or limes, olives or onions. I can tell you the relation to tonic and vermouth. Rocks, neat. The folklore of gin as the crier's drink and the impact of the juniper berry." I looked through the glass and smiled at her.

But she didn't smile back, and for that matter, moved out two days later, saying maybe she'd spend some time with her brother in Vermont and maybe she'd write. She said that it had been coming for a long time, that I must have known that, but it still seemed like a shame, what with us making it all the way through winter and then missing spring.

The fact is, I liked Alice a lot. Once or twice there had been, however hypothetical, conversations regarding love. We irritated one another with our habits, argued over movies and commentaries in the newspaper, but it was a nice thing to live with her, making coffee for more than one person and not having to go to the laundromat alone. We did most things together, something I'd never noticed until after she'd gone.

A few days after Alice left I stop at the Korean market to pick up a bunch of poppies, thick red ones with stems like twisted garden hoses.

"Your friend's not sick, Mister?" the Korean man asks me. For a minute my eyes get lost in his clean white apron, thinking of how I have no way of knowing. I nod. The grocer's hand moves slowly over the piles of green peppers and winter plums, stopping to pick up an apple the size of a baseball. "You tell her Mr. Haun says feel better."

I slice the bottoms off the poppies at an angle and put them on the coffee table in a glass jar that could have easily passed for a vase. The flowers were Alice's favorites and I don't even want to get into how seldom I bought them for her. Then I pour a little Bombay in a coffee cup and watch them, just sit there till three or four in the morning, staring at the flowers and thinking about old Alice and the way she used to tie back her hair in one of my handkerchiefs before she washed her face.

Early April isn't the best time to quit teaching. Everybody assumes there has to be one hell of a good reason why you couldn't have stuck it out another six weeks. But she didn't come back and I decide there's no sense in maintaining the pretense of a professional life without her. Besides, the flowers were keeping me up.

This is when I take the job at the Hallmark Inn, working as the night manager, which is nothing more than a glorified desk clerk. You get a better looking name tag and slightly more money. The shift is from midnight until eight the next morning, which suits me fine as I can bring the poppies with me. The place needs them. I buy a fresh bunch every Tuesday, always careful to rotate florists, and have come to believe that the people at the motel rely on the starched red petals as much as I do. Not much happens as a night clerk; maybe two dozen people come through, and half of them are looking for directions. I bought a couple of books on bartending and one on just gin (the only one ever written) and read them behind the desk. The gin book is vague for the most part and I'm thinking about putting together one of my own. Nobody here cares if I work on it, seeing as how I'm the night manager and most of them have been drinking anyway. I think we should all go at it together, really tie one on, lock up the doors and light the 'No' on the 'No Vacancy' sign. But there are usually only two or three people around here and they'd probably think I was trying to trap them or something. People are suspicious like that. When I'm not reading or looking at the flowers, I write Alice's name on a piece of motel stationery, all in small case and then big block capitals. The morning shift comes in at seven, but I stay around an extra hour to straighten up all the figures from the night before and get the cash deposit ready. One morning, maybe I'd had a drink, this girl wakes me up, one of the seven to three maids. She shakes my shoulder and for a minute I think she's someone else.

"You're safe," she tells me and smiles. This is a quality smile. "Alice." She points to the piece of paper. "Nice name." She smiles again because we have some sort of secret now and walks over to the restaurant to get a cup of coffee. I go too, as the lobby is dead and the orange checks on the carpet are making my head spin.

"Hey," I say to her back which is narrow but not too thin. She pours an extra cup of coffee and hands it to me. Her name is Rita, unless she's got somebody else's name tag on; people do that when they lose their own. I thank her with as much dignity as the circumstance allows.

"Sure." She downs a very hot cup of coffee in two sips. "But you've got to be more careful. Bob, the morning guy, he's real tight about things like that."

I nod.

"This Alice," she says, tilting her head to one side, "your wife?"

I shake my head.

"Girlfriend?"

"It was a message for somebody," I say with so much ease that I almost believe it myself. "I just started playing around with the name."

She tries hard not to smile and I am flattered. "I guess there isn't much to do in the middle of the night."

Rita Louise DeTulio is twenty-four and has had two waitressing jobs and a secretarial position, all left for honorable reasons. I have her phone number, address and social security, as she filled out every blank and I have access to that information. She is never Alice. First off she's quite a bit younger and it shows. Alice has a few scratches in the corners of her eyes that come up when she smiles. When she smiled. She was serious most of the time; even in her sleep she spoke in a low, urgent tone about things I could never understand. Rita is a plum, not that she throws it around, but she walks through the lobby like someone who has a little time on her hands. She knows the words to all the popular songs and sings them as she pushes a vacuum around my desk, always stopping to ask how I am or gossip about another employee. It's been awhile since I made conversation, but she seems to understand that and tells me to have a good day as she guides her Hoover off across the carpet.

"Nice flowers," She says one morning, holding the neck of a poppy between her thumb and forefinger and dropping her nose down to the black heart.

"They don't smell like anything."

"Nope." She pulls back her head. "Shame."

We talk for a minute before she wanders away to sift sand into ashtrays. She is still close enough that I could call out to her, see if she

knows anything about gin. But instead she turns around to face me, squaring off her shoulders. The morning check-out has begun and the second-rate business men are brushing past the maids who are going upstairs to hunt for loose change. In this lobby that is strictly reserved for passing through, Rita stands perfectly still.

“You must sleep all day.”

“What?”

“If you work at night you must sleep all day.”

“I don’t need much sleep.” I wasn’t thinking about Alice; this had nothing to do with her. I didn’t think about my old criteria for judging women, what they read or how far they’d travelled. Rita probably wouldn’t know Keats from Yeats and had possibly never left the state, but there she was with the sun in her dark hair not looking like she expected anything from anyone. I ask her out for seven and she says eight would be better. My shift is over and she waits at the window to wave to me as I am getting into my car. It suddenly occurs to me that it is summer.

Dear Alice,

But that’s as far as the letter ever gets. I’ve written it out, typed it, used scratch pads and the stationery she left in the desk. In my mind I tell her trivial things, that the bulbs she planted out back came up and that I still have some of her stuff that I would be happy to send unless she wants me to keep it here. Sometimes it’s all anger; then other times the words are so helpless and small I couldn’t begin to write them down. Tonight I thought of writing to her about Rita, but she would know what it all meant, even if I’m not so sure. I put down the letter and re-read the directions to Rita’s place. There won’t be time to take her home, make it back here for the flowers and get to work, so I have to take them with me. I wrap the poppies in a sheet of thin green paper I keep stacked on the counter. It’s Wednesday night and they’re in their prime. The ice in my drink has given up the ghost so I dump what is left of it down the garbage disposal to save myself the trouble of wrestling around in the freezer. I stare thoughtfully into the sink. Someone should have been there to see it.

I’m not late, but when I get to Rita’s she is standing on the front steps of her apartment. She is wearing a pale blue dress with puff sleeves and little buttons down the front that is pretty but strangely girlish. For a minute I think it is probably her best dress and it makes me sad somehow. I didn’t want a best dress, didn’t deserve one, just a big sweater and a sweetness that is entirely false. Before I can get out to open the door she is climbing in the car and, in an attempt not to wrinkle her skirt, nearly sits on the flowers.

"Hey." She reaches beneath her with one hand. "These are the ones I liked. That was sweet, nobody ever thinks of flowers anymore." She smiles at them through the paper.

"No big deal," I say, but not to her. Let her keep them, I think, she can have them. She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I'll go put these in water and be right back."

I want to tell her it isn't necessary, that poppies are primarily desert dwellers, storing more water in their stems than most flowers. They would have been fine for the whole night. I follow them onto the front porch where Rita unlocks two dead bolts and finds a light switch. The apartment is a small efficiency, furnished with what appears to be randomly acquired pieces. Still, it has a sense of direction, years of gathering, mending, refinishing, that commands a certain amount of respect. "It's not permanent," she says from the kitchen where she is trying to find something for the flowers. "I mean, the rent isn't bad and I figure I can put some money away and go somewhere, California maybe." She finds a green vase with blistered glass and fills it with water. "There." I look at them until she starts to rearrange the stems, thinking that something is wrong. "Where do you get these anyway? I thought they were illegal or something."

"Only the *Papaver somniferum*, opium poppies. They aren't legal in the States."

She is only half listening, looking to see where she had laid down her keys. "Is there a difference?"

" $C_{12}H_{19}NO_3$." She drew back, as if the equation made her uncomfortable.

"Opium base. Morphine, heroin. These are the *Escholtzia californica*, California poppies. Their only purpose in life is to grow on road dividers."

"Where did you learn so much about flowers?" She puts the vase on the table and starts moving me towards the door.

I tell her the truth, that the flowers taught me everything, and then I left them there, behind two strong locks. That's another thing, Alice: poppies and gin.

It's a good bar, dark and no songs on the juke box that could make you leave in the middle of a drink. Rita bums a quarter and pushes down two selections. She checks the glass over the record titles to make sure I'm watching her, that's clear enough, and pushes off one shoe to rub a stockinged foot against the back of her calf. She comes back humming "The Seven Year Ache" and orders a drink that should be reserved for poolsides in tropical islands. "I'm not much of a drinker," she says picking off the fruit from beneath the yellow paper umbrella. "I don't mind it, you know, when other people do, but it all

goes to my head.”

I nod. I've always been a great one for bar conversations, sitting around until they close the place, leaving behind rows of empty glasses, thinking I might have changed things with my conclusions. Sitting here looking at Rita I can't for the life of me remember what I talked about. “What do you want to do in California?”

“Oh, I don't know, go back to school maybe. If I got some business training or learned to work on computers I could really go somewhere. That's where all the opportunities are now.”

I try to ask her why she doesn't do that here, but it comes out wrong. Somehow it sounds like I want her to stay.

“I've been here my whole life. You start to wonder if there isn't something out there you might be missing. I mean, I'd stay if I had a reason to.” She downs her entire drink in one even sip. “I don't mind what I do, I just don't want to do it forever. What about you? You haven't been at the motel long.”

“No.”

“So what were you before that?”

I want to say in love, but it struck me how rarely truth is applicable in such conversations. “I was a teacher.”

“My God, really? I was telling Linda, the cashier, that you were too smart for the motel, but I never would have thought you were a teacher. Why would you leave a job like that?”

I catch myself drumming my finger on the table and stop. “I was bored, or just feeling a little boxed in. I don't know, I guess I wanted to see what else was going on.”

“So do you think you'll go back?”

I hadn't thought about it. I still found something noble in my suffering, but I wondered how long it could go on without an audience. Like Rita, I wasn't sure how long I'd be content with nothing more than the Hallmark Inn. “Eventually, yes, I suppose I will.”

“You have to stop every now and then if you're going to be sure about what you're doing. The only people who stay in the motel business are the people who own them.” She's smiling now. Maybe she thinks I'm slumming or trying to find a deeper meaning, maybe she thinks I'm her ticket out. “Dance with me,” Rita says.

There really isn't a dance floor, just a little space where there aren't any tables. There is no one else dancing and, for that matter, there is no music.

“Come on,” she says, putting her pretty hand over my wrist, “it isn't so serious.”

She punches down a Willie Nelson song and puts her arms around

my neck. I haven't danced in so many years it makes me feel old. "This isn't bad." Rita pulls towards me so that my cheek brushes through her hair.

"No, not so bad," I tell her.

"Olives are packed in brine. Salt. Would you pour salt into gin? Good gins, say Tanqueray, Bombay, Beefeaters, have citrus leanings to begin with. It's only my theory, but if you sip it cold, not on the rocks, I think you'll see what I mean. The oil of the peel, and please, only the peel, is going to complement that." I hold up my drink to the light and she stares at it like the Holy Grail. "Clarity," I tell her. "It should never appear too oily in the light."

"I want one."

"Gin and tonic?"

"No, I've had those. I want to try what you're talking about." I offer her a sip of mine, a martini, a little to the wet side. She takes the glass and turns it around carefully, so as to drink from the same spot. Her eyes water some, but she takes it down clean and nods. She holds it for a minute. "I want one of these. Waitress." Rita waves a woman with a short black skirt and a bow tie to our table. "I'll have one of these."

The woman looks at me; it isn't the kind of place where they're careful about remembering drinks. "Martini," I offer.

"No, no," Rita says, "straight up. Cold . . ." she looks at me to see if she's forgotten anything. "And a twist."

"Bombay or Tanqueray?" I say.

"Bombay," she says without hesitation, "Definitely Bombay."

I agree to have the same and we laugh as the waitress shrugs and clicks away in high black heels.

"Do you think she's pretty?" Rita whispers.

"Not at all."

"I was a cocktail waitress once, the money's good, but you have to put up with a lot of, you know," she pats her hip, "that sort of thing." She leans over the table. I can see every one of her teeth. "I got fired. I didn't put it down when I applied to the motel, but I slugged some guy in the stomach. I'd never hit a soul in my life, except maybe my sister when we were kids, but this guy, he was just too much."

For all the cocktail waitresses I had seen, I had always hoped one of them would have the courage to throw a punch, even when that punch should have been directed at me. "They fired you for that?"

"Oh, yeah." The drinks come and Rita thanks the woman. "That's a federal offense in a place like this. I was probably out of line."

"No," I say and raise my glass to her, "you have my complete respect. Here's to you, Rita."

She picks up her glass and touches it to mine. "To you too then."

We drink up and I pay the check. "Let's walk," she says, "it's nice out and we're only about a half mile away."

"How are you going to get home?"

"I'm going on at six. I'll just lift a key and sleep over. I brought my stuff." She pats her oversized purse; I had wondered why she carried such a large bag to go out for a drink. "You can leave your car here and walk back for it in the morning. Nobody's going to bother it." She puts her hands on her hips and scowls at me. In the street light I can see her face is flushed red from the drinks. "You do walk, don't you?"

"On occasion."

"Good." She takes hold of my arm. We walk without talking, passing other couples and a bum and kids that look like they're out too late. I think of how we must look, moving so comfortably, our arms lightly connected, not two people who have run out of things to say, but two people who understand things without saying them. Catching pieces of our reflection in restaurant windows it seems we are something entirely different.

We're back at the motel by ten. "You lift the key," she says to me. "We can go upstairs and talk."

"We can sit in the bar, have another drink."

She shakes her head. "Gossip. We'd never hear the end of it."

It is a slow night and I stare at the nearly full rack. There is a strange shudder, partly because my flowers are at Rita's apartment, partly because I just realized this is what people do in motels. "I haven't seen many of the rooms here. You better get it."

She lifts number twenty-three when Scott, the three to midnight man, walks over to answer the phone. Rita's giggling and maybe a little drunk, but pretty, very.

She flips the third switch in a row of four, which turns on a dim light on the night table, and bounces a couple of times on the edge of the bed. She says this is the best room in the place, but I can't see that it's different from any of the others. I wonder who in the hell does paintings for motel rooms. She takes my chin in her hand and turns me around to face her. She smells lightly of liquor and lillies of the valley and when I kiss her it's as if she'll fall on the floor if I take my mouth away. I'm thinking about the poppies, wondering where I am. Rita unbuttons my shirt and when I'm sitting in my pants I start to really look at her and then I look at the painting and then I lay flat on my stomach facing the bathroom, hoping they'll both be gone when I get up. Maybe I'm a little drunk too. Rita rubs my back and then kisses me once between the shoulder blades.

"Don't play too hard to get," she tells me, but I don't roll. "Hey."

She kisses my neck at the hairline and then, as if she suddenly understands something she could not possibly understand, sits up and takes her purse from the night table.

She is almost to the door; at least I can't smell her any more. Without that scent the room feels empty, unbearable even. "Rita," I say, raising up on my elbows. "What do you know about? I mean, really know better than anybody else?"

She smiles and pushes off her shoes beside the dresser.