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ALICE BABETTE TOKLAS (American, 1877–1967)
Toklas became a widow at the death of Gertrude Stein on July 27th, 1946.

The Day We Met

by Riba Taylor

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I'll always remember the first time I saw her. My friend Harriet and I had just arrived in Paris, and we were invited over to the home of Gertrude's brother and sister-in-law. I remember how the afternoon sun slanted through the western wall of windows in their third floor flat and bounced light back up into the room from the luster of the polished wood floors. I remember the sunlight dancing off the deep reds and ambers of her coral brooch and her voice resounding in the wide high-ceilinged room. And I remember her laugh, a rich, full chortling as she stood and smiled at me and reached for both my hands. Hers were warm and dry holding mine like the sun heating skin. I met the strength of her grasp with my own and smiled, too, as I met her eyes. It was then I heard the distinct tolling of a bell inside me. She was the first true genius I met. (These days everyone has heard about the bells that rang for me—first for Gertrude and then later for Picasso and Whitehead. People still ask me, "Did you really hear a bell, Alice?" or, "You're being figurative, I presume, Miss Toklas?" But it was actually the most literal tolling of a bell, each time, the wide hollow clanging of a large metal clapper hitting heavy steel. It was not a small bell.)

We stood there that afternoon holding each other's hands for moments that spilled over into something else, something longer than the ordinary length of time for such greetings. We smiled again and squeezed once more and then let go, both slightly embarrassed to have still been there holding hands in front of everyone—but more pleased, really, to have met (how could we not be?) to care too terribly about our slight transgression. Her dress was mannish in its lines, and she was large and lusty somehow but severe, too, with her chiseled Roman emperor features. Since then many people insist we were never again apart, but it's not true. Not in those beginning times. But we did recognize something in each other that day. We both knew we wanted to find out more about each other, about how we might be with each other. And it's true we spent as much time as possible finding out in the days and weeks that followed.

I will always remember, though, how the afternoon sunlight caught the coral of her brooch, and how it felt to hear her deep laugh echo in my chest and belly, and to see the look in that young Gertrude's eyes that said "I know you. I know you, and I already know I like you." My eyes told her the same. That sort of connection is almost irresistible, I think. There was an element of that in it for each of us.

It's funny how, as we age, we can look back sometimes and catch those images of people we love in their earlier years. Like my memory of that afternoon at the Stein's, of Gertrude's still-young face with her long dark hair coiled in elaborate swirls about her head. Today there are other Gertrude's for me, too. I have a lovely memory, for instance, of Gertrude and I years later in Bilignin. It was a summer night in a long quiet string of summer nights, but I can see her this one evening, as vivid as though I had dreamed it last night. She sat across from me, pushed back from the table on the terrace. It was not quite dusk. Our lush meal had ended, and we were each enjoying having the time to relax together. We were both engrossed in a stretch of novel reading, and I remember Gertrude reaching for her book on a nearby chair and sending me a sheepish smile.

"You don't mind, do you?" she said. I shook my head and smiled back, loving her, amused that she felt almost guilty about escaping with such pleasure into prose.

"I'll enjoy reading for awhile, too," I said. And it was true. "As long as you don't become too sleepy," I couldn't resist adding with a coy smile. I almost bit my lip as soon as the words had left my mouth, sure it was a thoughtless remark. She

was sometimes sensitive about her tendency to grow unbearably sleepy in the blink of an eye, and didn't tend to respond well to teasing on that subject. But that night instead of being annoyed she grinned at me across the table—and this is the snapshot I've carried forward all these years in my mind. This snapshot is of an older Gertrude, her hair much more grey than brown, and shorn short like Caesar. I can still see her grinning up at me and grabbing my wrist as I passed her chair on the way to retrieve my own novel. She held my wrist and smiled and told me with the utmost vehemence and the most mischievous light in her eyes that she would not become too sleepy—that she would indeed be entirely alert later that night when we went to bed, and that she most particularly wanted me to rest assured in that area. We laughed, then, and spent an hour or two in familiar fiction heaven. And how we spent the rest of that warm summer night is no one's business but our own.

For some reason people have always seemed to feel justified prying into or speculating about the "nature" of my relationship with Gertrude. They've always seemed to assume they have a right to know whether or not we were platonic. Even our private love notes to each other have by now been scrutinized by scholars, some going so far as to stipulate the specific sexual or other physical acts they believe this word or that phrase must mean. I know some people think I'm a bitter old woman—a black widow woman ready to leech the life out of some unsuspecting acquaintance. I don't believe that's true. But this is something I am bitter about. How dare they think they have a right to know any of these things? And especially, how dare they make up wild deviate conjectures based on their own amazingly inept interpretations of not only Gertrude's published text (which most people acknowledge as often difficult to interpret, even by some of the more skilled writers and readers of our time), but to also feel entitled to examine our nonsensical, private little love notes, and then to sully them with their vulgar insinuations? It is beyond my abilities to not resent this, to not be bitter.

And yet I can't regret her work is being read around the world, or that I had a hand in making that happen. When she was alive, I did whatever I could to see her published, and since her death there were days when that was the only thing that kept me going, kept me here. The first days and weeks and months without her were almost more than I could bear. I didn't want to be alive if it meant being without her. But there were pages and pages of her words no one else had read. It became my reason for living. Seeing everything published became my only true aim. I think for years it was really all I lived for, all that kept me alive. The day I signed the contract on the last of the work, I felt prouder than I can remember

ever feeling. I had done it. And as I write these words, I know they can't take that away from me. As angry as it makes me to read their ugly insinuations about the two of us, I will not allow that bitterness to take away the gladness and the pride I feel knowing I helped make it happen. I helped bring the world her words. My first genius and my best.

Riba Taylor is currently an adjunct English instructor for Mendocino College and Santa Rosa Junior College. She fell in love with Gertrude Stein as an undergraduate Women's Studies major at UC Berkeley in the late seventies and earned her MA in English, with an emphasis in creative writing, from Sonoma State many years later (at the beginning of our newest century).

In addition to teaching community college, Riba works with individuals and small groups to help people improve their writing skills or hone their masterpieces, including teaching courses online. Creative nonfiction draws her as a writer, especially creative memoir, and she has a particular fondness for the genre of fictional memoir, as evidenced by her piece here.

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