

The Alice P. Gamboe Strip

Diane Vreuls

She stood at the slot and watched for the photos to drop. It said sixty seconds. At one hundred and five they rolled through the mangle, ironed but wet. She plucked up the strip by the edges and blew it from left to right, checking each frame as she blew. Made for the writing counter, rummaging with one hand through her purse for the manicure scissors in the red plastic case. Cut the strip into four poses, curved at the tops and bottoms like nails. Reversed them. Printed in ball-point pen on the back of each: Alice P. Gamboe. The Mortimer Woodworth Service Plaza. May 11, 1973. Put each into a separate envelope, licked them shut. Stamped and addressed them and put them down the chute by the door, under the map that says you are here.

I received mine this morning. Must be the second pose. First has eyes closed. Second one eyes pop, startled, mouth open. Under the shiny chemical coating, she's grayer, hair bushing out at the ears, face slipping down to jowls; otherwise looks the same as when she used to ring my bell at one a.m. in her bathrobe crying, "You'll never guess what just happened." Whatever the crisis, it was never as startling as Alice, rasping and wild on my doorstep, heated bedroom slippers melting a patch through the snow. I'd unlock the door and fix tea, calling up to Franklin, "It's okay it's Alice, go back to sleep," and then stomp loudly into the kitchen, banging pots to drown out his answer—a needless scruple; she never heard a word he said. Anytime. It was a pact. We'd focus. "You hear me, I swear you're the only one," we'd say to each other.

We planned to grow old together. Get the children raised, the husbands raised, move out from the cluttered workrooms we were forever rearranging, take command of our huge Victorian houses, cut off the mooring and sail them side by side down to the sea. When I moved she never forgave me. "You're my family, you're my history," she wailed over her tea. I was very tired, been packing all day, two bins for Alice, including the silk screen equipment purchased in common one fall when I ran for the school board. Alice nailed me up in giant red

letters on all the telephone poles. TOLA STREET. That's my name. At every intersection, the traffic went mad. She refused to take them down, even after I'd lost the election. I paid my kids a nickel a poster, they begged me to run every year. There were thirty-five posters left over. She thought I should take them with me, wear them as sandwich boards down my new block as I walked the dog. "Let them know who you are right away." But I've been leery of meeting new people. Suppose one's an Alice?

The curtain didn't quite close; there's a streak blanching part of her face. The eyes are still piercing, teary from smoke. Three packs a day. She was losing her distance perception, kept bumping into trees, lifting her foot too soon for the stairs, she was hard to walk with. It was not the companionable stroll she thought she offered when she came by my window at four, shouting my name like calling a kid out to play. "You've got to get out of your house. Get some air." I'd be topping a pot, dipping a print, scalding the jars for jam. "Tomorrow." "Hell tomorrow. Now."

I'd give in to stop her yelling; the west side neighbors complained. Dry my hands and run alongside her. She loped, always ahead, or stopped dead in her tracks to light up a smoke. She put the burned matches into her pockets. She wanted to talk about Doyle, but got distracted at first by scenery. Nests, clouds, remarkable trademarks on pavements. "Lookit that, lookit that!" she'd run off to scout a wonder. She was my private tour guide to my very own block. Eventually she'd tire and wait for me at the corner. Seated rump on the grass, bare feet bathed in the gutter, she relaxed and spoke directly about her most intimate life. It made me uncomfortable. Her voice was persistently public, rising above the buzzsaws of men trimming trees. Our posture seemed suspect in the glaring daylight of our town cleared of elms, where grown ladies talk on patios, protected, shaded by awnings, not stuck out on curbs. When Alice wasn't looking I smiled at the neighbors strolling their children or dogs, waved to the station wagons giving us berth as if we might roll headlong into the street. Gaily signalling our presence would, I hoped, make it normal. Alice was oblivious.

"You'll never believe what happened last night."

I always did. Maybe that's what kept them together. When I moved they split.

One of the poses goes to Doyle; I know she won't let him off. In the arcade, with machine guns gunning, the light flashes four times. It's a hit, another, another, Alice comes out blinking, she's blinded, she's staggering towards the slot. At the mall standing in gumwrappers, the broken plastic cups, she studies the strips glued onto the booth, the automatic quadruplet machine. Their faces are powdered and tinted, hers comes shiny from the boiler, juiced out.

I nursed her through buying the house, no first floor toilet, she worried they wouldn't make it upstairs after eighty, no room for a moving chair on the staircase, though you could easily ramp the stoop. She timed the birth of each son with an eye to what age she'd be at their college graduations, their weddings, how long she could serve as grandparent. Married or not, Doyle was hers for

keeps, she must send him three photos a year, as she does to me, to remind him.

He was fickle. You wouldn't suspect it, not with those guileless eyes, that open face. Sincerity, the easiest of virtues, and a kid's trust. Friends exclaimed how the children resembled him. I did. It rankled Alice. Truth was, it was he who resembled the boys. When Jackie was four, Doyle was four, when I left they'd both reached eleven. He had that kid's need to please. You talk to him, asking him questions:

"Hi Doyle, how's it going?"

he says,

"Okay?"

"When you get back?"

"Thursday?"

Tries to give the answer he thinks you want, keeps hunting your face for a clue. He told my husband Friday.

He was constantly courting; a lot of people were taken in. I think he seldom went further than openers, got people, women, dependent on his attentions, then dropped them, same as in business: always bidding, never closing the deal. But it destroyed Alice. She wanted to feel she gave all. Took it out on her kids, wouldn't share them. Became their nursery school teacher, roommother, den mother, gave them piano lessons, substitute taught. Was studying for lay preacher at St. John's Episcopal Church, was going to officiate at their weddings and baptize each grandchild.

He reviled her devotion. "Tell her to get a job," he'd beg me every evening he stopped by before he went home. "Teach her batik. She should learn from you, Tola; a man admires an independent woman, someone who grows."

She's grown; it's documented. In the bowling alley lobby after breaking a bill. At Sarragut Point, she's waiting for three teenaged couples. They horse around at the threshold, teasing their hair with tiny brushes, jostling in front of the mirror, jokes about what's out of order in the second booth. Once inside, they pair overlapped, gazing soberly into the flash, the official engagement portrait, four vows We do. They come out in embarrassed silence to wait at the slot. The next couple enters. It's Vegas. When the returns are in they uncouple. Comparisons. Who took the best. Alice goes into the booth alone. She never combs.

Doyle changed companies every third autumn, a revolving junior partner, "Once you've learned the business, it's dead." She'd cut out the newspaper clipping for her press file under the sofa: birthday cards, ticket stubs, ready for audit. She never threw anything out, but lacked the gift of accumulation. "It's all slipping by," she said, trimming the margins. "It doesn't add up." A month after I moved she sent the finale. A *Suburban Times* clipping, picture of Doyle, newly on board at the Bealson Corp. Street address, prior employments, he is survived by two boys at home. Not a mention of Alice; that did it. She waits

for the couples to wander off down the midway. Puts in the coin. Pop flash, serial execution, six and one fourth cents a bolt.

Her mother died in childbirth. Her father married, remarried, younger brides. He sent her wedding snapshots, his hair turned gray to black to blonde. She went to Orlando to see him and returned three days too soon. "Their baby is younger than Mike." Just outside town at the self-service restaurant spanning the freeway she mailed him the third pose.

For the fourth she's purchased an album, to write in with white ink. Alice P. Gamboe, the Goldworth Science Museum. Union Station, the 29th of December. D&D Discount Center, four for twenty cents. No, it goes to the County Recorder, County Courthouse, Marks, Ala. They've got her birth certificate and a pile of photocopies: her driver's license, her expired passport, the bride and groom cutting the cake. The children's footprints at birth, her realtor's diploma. The last pose in Barland's basement, she lost count and is getting up to go. One from the Greyhound bus depot November 4, 1968. The chemical wasn't dry. The cardboard adheres to the envelope, you pull it out, her face is stuck inside. The Ambassador Hotel. She doesn't smile: the gum surgery. She entered the booth at Pike's Peak, her bangs are white. At the Portland Exposition, the kids are sitting with her, half a face each. They still look like Doyle. The Idaho State Fair. Her distance perception is worse, she's lunging towards the mirror trying to center her face between tapes. Her chin and blouse from Coney Island, she's forgotten to lower the stool. In a motorcycle helmet. In the airport, wearing a winter coat. Drives to the next place, heavy with quarters. Alice P. Gamboe. In front of a cloth of stars.