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A  
NOVEL

N O W   I S   T H E   T I M E   T O  

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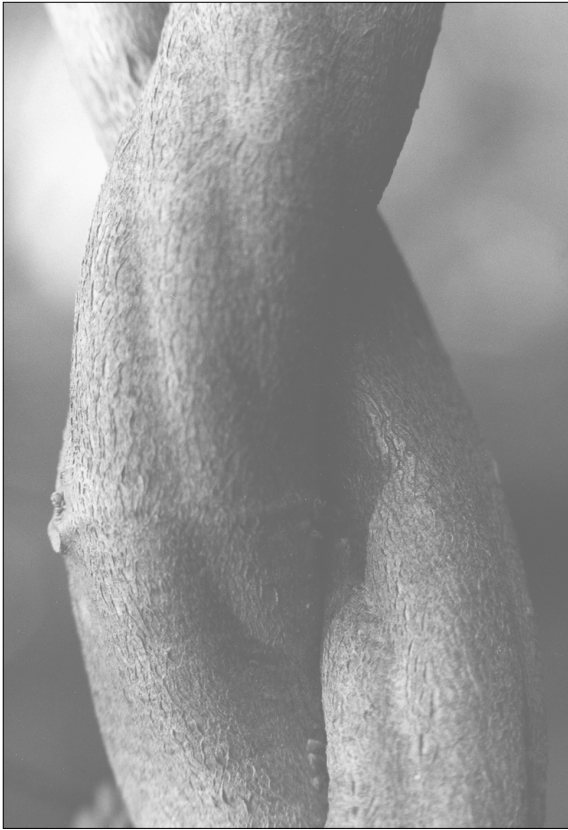
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*NOW IS  
THE TIME  
TO OPEN  
YOUR HEART*



*Banisteriopsis caapi*

*NOW IS  
THE TIME  
TO OPEN  
YOUR HEART*



A N O V E L

Alice Walker



B A L L A N T I N E B O O K S

N E W Y O R K

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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My father's mother was murdered when he was a boy. Before she married my grandfather, Henry Clay Walker, her name was Kate Nelson. This novel is a memorial to the psychic explorer she might have become. It also made clear to me in the writing how much I miss her. And have always missed her.



*NOW IS  
THE TIME  
TO OPEN  
YOUR HEART*

## *Cool Revolution*

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KATE TALKINGTREE SAT MEDITATING IN A LARGE hall that was surrounded by redwood trees. Although the deep shade of the trees usually kept the room quite cool, today was unseasonably warm and Kate, with everybody else, was beginning to perspire. They had been meditating, on and off their cushions, for most of the morning, beginning at five-thirty when they roused themselves, at the sound of the bell, from their beds. When they broke from meditating inside, they quietly made their way outside and into the courtyard. Up and down the path that led to the front door of the hall they did a walking meditation that had been taught them by a lot of different Buddhist teachers, some from America and some from Asia. It was a slow, graceful meditation that she liked; she enjoyed the feeling of a heel touching the earth long before a toe followed it. Meditating this way made her feel almost as slow as vegetation; it went well with her new name, a name she'd taken earlier, in the spring.

Ever since she was small she'd felt a wary futility about talking. At the same time she realized it was something that, in order for the world to understand itself at all, had to be done. Her old last name had been Nelson, and for a time she'd

thought of calling herself Kate Nelson-Fir. She loved fir trees, especially the magnificent, towering ones that grew on the Northwest coast.

When it was time for the dharma talk to begin Kate made her way to a spot close enough to see and hear the teacher very easily. He was a middle-aged man of southern European descent, with an ecru complexion and a shining bald head. His brown eyes twinkled as he talked. Every once in a while he reached up and stroked the silver earring in his left ear. Because of the earring and because he seemed spotless in his flowing robes, she mentally dubbed him Mr. Clean. She had been coming to his talks every day for more than a week, and had enjoyed them very much. Today he was talking about the misguided notion that a “hot” revolution, with guns and violence, such as the ones attempted in Africa, Cuba, and the Caribbean, could ever succeed. He seemed unaware that these revolutions had been undermined not only by their own shortcomings but also by military interference from the United States. The only revolution that could possibly succeed, he maintained, smiling, was the “cool” one introduced to the world by the Lord Buddha, twenty-five hundred years ago.

Something about this statement did not sit well with Kate. She looked at him carefully. He was certainly a well-fed-looking soul, she thought. Not many meals missed by that one, except by accident. Quietly glancing down at the program on the floor beside her, she saw he had grown up in an upper-middle-class home, had had educated and cultured people as parents and as grandparents, had studied and lived in Europe as well as in the East. Was now a prominent professor at one of the country’s most famous universities. Easy enough for him to dismiss the brown and black and yellow and poor white people all over the globe who worried constantly where their next meal was com-

ing from, she thought. How they would feed, clothe, and educate their children. Who, if they did sit down to meditate, would probably be driven up again by the lash. Or by military death squads, or by hunger, or by . . . the list was long.

Looking around her she noticed most of the meditators shared the teacher's somewhat smug, well-fed look. They were overwhelmingly white and middle- to upper-middle-class and had the money and leisure time to be at a retreat. In fact, she noted, she seemed to be the only person of color there. What was wrong with this picture?

Her mind, which had been clear as a reflecting pool just minutes before, now became cloudy. This was exactly what meditation was meant to prevent. She took a deep breath, labeled her thoughts "thinking," as she'd been instructed to do if her mind wandered during meditation, and settled herself more firmly on her cushion. She would listen to this teacher, whom she indeed respected very much, and she would not be critical. Besides, she knew what he meant. There was a way in which all "hot" revolutions defeated themselves, because they spawned enemies. Look at those crazy ex-Cubans in Miami, for instance, who never recovered from having some of their power taken away, and the endless amount of confusion, pain, and suffering they caused.

After the talk she began to think in earnest. She felt she had reached an impasse on the Buddhist road.

That evening and the next day and the next she found herself unable to meditate. She kept looking out the window instead, just as she had looked out of the window of the Church of God and Christ, as a child, when she had been unable to believe human beings, simply by being born, had sinned. The redwood trees looked so restful, their long branches hanging down to the earth. Each tree created a little house, a shelter, around it-

self. Just right for a human or two to sit. She hadn't realized this before, how thoughtful this was. But on her very next walking meditation she slowly, slowly, made her way to the largest red-wood tree and sat under it, becoming invisible to the dozens of people who continued their walking meditation and slowly walked all around her.

When everybody else returned to the meditation hall, she did not.

## To Kill or to Thaw the Anaconda

---

SHE DREAMED SHE WAS EMPTYING HER FREEZER and there among the forgotten leftovers lay an alive but perfectly frozen anaconda. A huge orange and spotted snake, ashen, until she poured water on it and its ice sheeting began to melt; the color of the sun. She felt she must kill it before it thawed. She ran to others for help. None could help her; they were busy with their own lives. Their own anacondas. She cried out to one person after another: *Necesito ayuda! Puedo?* I need help! Can I help? She thought she was saying, Can *you* help? But she wasn't. Only on waking, all outside help refused her, did she realize dealing with the anaconda was an inside job. Whether to kill it or let it thaw and live was entirely up to her.

And wasn't she always saying what Grandmother Yagé had taught her: We are all on the back of a giant anaconda. It is slithering and sliding, darting and diving, like anacondas do. That is the reality of the world.

She woke up remembering a story from her days in the Black Freedom Movement. When she and her companions sought to encourage voting in a population that had been terrorized all their lives for trying to do so. An old woman had said

to them, as they walked their weary miles across Alabama and Georgia and other outposts of the soon to be dubbed “New South,” Let me tell you a story about a man and a snake. They put down their notepads and melting-in-their-hands pens, the heat was so intense, and hiked up their jeans, took a seat on a stump in her yard, and listened. She was so old she smelled like greens. And so real a number of them swooned. There was this man walking down the road, you see. And she pointed to the long dirt road down which they had trudged, looking for her house. And it was a very, very cold day. They looked into one another’s profusely perspiring faces and couldn’t begin to imagine it. And what do you think he saw just ahead of him on the road? Well, she carried on, without waiting for them to guess, there right in his path was a snake. Kinda a cute snake. You know, probably had hair like most people want and long eyelashes. Her audience smiled. It was frozen solid though, it was. But still, some part of it could talk to the man. You know how that is. They chuckled. And it said: Please, Mr. Man. I’m just a poor little ole snake nearly ’bout froze to death out here in this weather! Please take pity on me and warm me by putting me in your bosom. Now, the man wasn’t usually no fool. But you know how it sometimes be. That one day, well. He thought about it. And he was after all a Christian kind of a man. He stood there thinking how amazing it was that such a cute snake could talk. And then he stood there a good five or ten minutes thinking about what Christ would do. If I was to pick you up, he said, leaning over the snake so that his own shadow became a part of it, and he, being a sensitive soul, started to feel a connection, If I was to pick you up, how do I know you wouldn’t bite me? Oh, no, Mr. Man, if you would be so kind as to warm me up and let me live, why, it would be a horrible thing for me

to repay your kindness by biting you! I wouldn't dream of such a thing.

So after a while, the snake looking at him so pitiful, he picked the little ole thing up, and he put it in his bosom, in the pocket of his overalls. Just behind his package of Brown Mule chewing tobacco and right next to his chest, close to his heart, which was beating warming blood all through his sympathetic body. And they walked on. The man thinking real good things about himself and the little snake beginning to feel like him or her self again. Pretty soon the snake was warmed clear through. The man could feel it slowly uncoiling, slithering behind his hansker pocket just a tiny bit. It make him smile, to tell you the truth. It tickled him to think that something as humble as himself could bring something frozen almost dead practically back to life. He reached up to pat the snake. And the snake bit him.

He bit him on the jaw. And the man knew he was in the middle of Alabama or Mississippi or Georgia or north Florida or somewhere there wasn't likely to be no speedy help. He fell down in the middle of the road, just a cussin'. Why you do me like that? he asked the snake, who was now sliding nimbly across his pants leg. And the snake looked up at him and said, kind of shrugging his shoulders like those folks in France do: You knowed I was a snake when you picked me up. And the man started to die.

The old woman looked at the young people who had disturbed her peace to ask her to join their crusade. She had learned to live without picking up any snakes. She killed every one she saw, no hesitation and no questions asked. She did have a different ending for the story though, that she felt might do them good; for she could see they were understanding her to say what they were attempting was an exercise in futility.



She cleared her throat, which had as many wrinkles as the ocean has waves. Now listen, though, she said, most people stop that story right there. They act like the man was just a total fool, outsmarted one more time, like ole Adam. But when you think more about the story, about the man and the weather and the snake, you understand it differently.

How's that? someone from the group asked dejectedly. They had walked all morning in the broiling sun just to be told they were picking up something whose bite would eventually kill them.

Well, said the old woman, think about the weather. It was still real cold. That snake, he was gonna freeze again. Once he froze again, he'd be helpless again. No kind of protection for a snake too froze to bite.

So? asked the same person.

So, said the old woman, this is an endless kind of a thing. Do we kill it or do we let it live? Do we ever believe its true nature and does that true nature ever change? And does ours?

She had given them some grapes that grew out behind her house. And some water from her spring. Bye, she'd waved to them, as contented as a girl.

# Change

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SHE HAD DISMANTLED HER ALTAR. THE CANDLES, plentiful and varied, honoring deities from the Virgen de Guadalupe to Che, Jesus to her friend Sarah Jane, who'd been shot to death by death squads in Honduras, rested now in a large box beside the door. Her imposing poster of the languid and regal Quan Yin was rolled up and secured with a blue string, her classical Buddha who had begun to look like Ram Dass on acid she had draped with a purple cloth.

Her life was changing. She had felt it begin to shift beneath her feet. Or above her feet, because the change had started in her knees. In her fifty-seventh year they had, both of them, mysteriously, out of the blue, begun to creak.

At first she thought it was her shoes, an ancient pair of running shoes, noiseless as morning until then. Perhaps it was an article of clothing closer to her ear. But no, it was her knees. They creaked like unoiled door hinges. No bird, flying beside her as she ran, could make such a squawk. It seemed terrible to her. A failing of her always so quiet and unobtrusive body. The body of a farm girl—sturdy, peasant dependable—but also the body of a dancer—ever graceful, gliding through her days. But no more.

To her ears now every move was announced. She was unnerved.

She went, as soon as she could fathom where to go, to visit a knee specialist. To a woman who worked on the joints of athletes. This woman manipulated her knees, her legs, frowned, and ended the session by telling her to stretch every morning. To bring her calves to rest on the countertop in her kitchen while the coffee perked. Furthermore, said this woman, it would probably be useful if you invested in orthotics.

She did. And soon felt balanced, for the first time, perhaps, in her life. Until the constant change of shoes, the need to wear sandals in summer, the urge to walk barefoot on the beach, and in her own yard, stopped her. After this, wrenching pain in her hips, as her body sought to realign itself in patterns it had always known.

Her lover was still supple enough never to have experienced an ache in any part of his body except his head. He'd never experienced a creak anywhere. He was so inexperienced he could not hear her creakiness. He failed to grasp why such a small thing unsettled her. She, surely one of the people born "a big strong woman," such as Holly Near sang about. She wanted kisses on her knees that he could not remember to offer; nor could he understand, exactly, why kisses should be needed. It boded ill for them.

The lover before him would have understood perfectly. A woman closer to her own age, this lover had been capable of endlessly babying her, of kissing any bruise or pain, no matter how slight. Alas, she had soon enough felt smothered, and flown the too cozy nest. Still, at times like this, she missed having a lover who could feel, empathize with, her aging body.

She had dismantled her altar. Even the photographs of her parents—her mother radiant as a sun, her father glowing as a

moon—she had taken down. They now were on the floor, facing the mud-colored wall. For hours she had sat gazing into their beloved faces; all criticism of them forgotten; all complaints exhausted. Nothing remained but love. Not even desire to see them again remained; and she had been disconsolate when they had both died suddenly, when a train rammed their car, and she'd spent years thinking she might turn a corner somewhere and see them, catch up to them, as it were, because, curiously, in her imagination, they were always on a path ahead of her; she saw their backs, dissolving around a long curve in the trail.

This room, her altar room, resembled a cave. Dark and quiet, like being in the earth, and the candles had been like a hearth, a fire pit, beckoning one to come forward and sit.

This was no longer the case. All now was in disarray. Her surroundings mirrored a dissolution she felt growing inside herself. And though she had loved her home, her berry-colored house with starry blue trim, she thought frequently of selling it. She even thought of giving it away. It did not seem important, though for years she'd jumped for joy each time she managed to pay the mortgage or to add some small or large improvement. Now she dreaded thinking about its needs. She noticed a shabbiness creeping in, she who had been so fastidious and never left a single broken thing unrepaired. She found she cared little that the paint over the fireplace was beginning to peel, that the door to the kitchen didn't quite close. That there was a leak beside the bathtub drain. She even thought about these things positively, in some new and quite weird way. She could feel her house dissolving around her, as her parents dissolved when she daydreamed them. And there was a feeling of relaxing, of letting go, that was welcome.

Every word she wrote now she thought of burning. Old

journals she gathered in a pile. To save in already overstuffed cupboards? Or to burn? And one day, ceremonially, she burned not only some of her writing but several hundred-dollar bills, just to demonstrate to herself that these items were not the God/Goddess of her life. Her friends grew quite alarmed. She began to dream each and every night that there was a river. But it was dry. There she'd be in the middle of an ancient forest searching for her life, i.e., the river, and she would find it after a long journey, and it would be sand.

Her pens as well seemed to go empty on her. An unusual number of them, though practically brand new, refused to scratch more than a few pale lines. No matter that she banged them in frustration on the desktop. Her eyes dimmed. Nor could her new reading glasses often be found. Was it the end? she thought. Or what?

And so her friends—the ones in her psyche and the ones sitting around her dining table—said: You must find a real river somewhere in the world—forget the dry one in your dreams—to travel down. They suggested one of the deepest, swiftest, most challenging of all: the Colorado.

She went. Taking just her light duffel of hiking and sleeping gear, mosquito repellant, aspirin, and a walking stick a friend had carved from a twig, lovely in its lightness and the color of dried hemp, she started on this journey. They had told her the river was wide. They had told her it was cold and deep. They had told her it roared through the Grand Canyon like a locomotive. They had forgotten to mention there were rapids. And so, the night before the start of the river run, in a motel room not far from the Grand Canyon's rim, reading at last the material that had been sent to her by the able women who would steer her boat and the boats of the nine other women journeying also, she sat bolt upright in bed, startling her companion, a

friend of many kind and unkind years. *Merde*, she said (though she was not French or of that ancestry); there are rapids involved!

Not small, barely perceptible ripples on the river, but mighty upheavals of the river itself. The river, in fact, with its twenty- and thirty-foot waves, roiling beneath their tiny wooden dories, would attempt, daily, to dislodge them. She, having read about this, barely slept. And yet, it did not occur to her to turn back.

When she did sleep, for a few blissful minutes just before dawn, at which time they were to leave the motel, she dreamed she was in a high-rise building, living there, and that she was informed it was time for the water to rise. She thought this meant the water would rise perhaps to the level of the gutter outside the front door. But no, a cheerful dark woman waved from the control room of the global water department, high above her own dwelling, and, pulling a lever, instigated a flow of dark water, so dark a water it resembled oil, and all the floors beneath her were soon submerged. And then her own flat was flooded. She wondered of course if she would drown. But apparently not: By some fate she seemed to swim well in oil and water and she marveled that in the world of nondream these two were said not to mix.

She whispered her dream to her buddy Avoa. Who yawned, smiled at her, and said: Hmmm. Oil and water. Both. Sounds refreshing and rich. Before disappearing into the shower. Kate lay abed a few moments longer, musing.

Her lover, Yolo, had watched her leave. A compact, muscular woman with good skin and creamy white teeth, a woman no longer sure there was a path through life or how indeed to fol-

low one if there was. He'd folded her in his arms, yawning as he stretched her slightly backward. It was already over between them. Both of them felt it. Her journey now was to be with women. Only women. Because of women. And partly because she had seemed to feel, and to wonder aloud, about the possibility that only women, these days, dreamed of rivers, and were alarmed that they were dry.

He had no such dreams, certainly. And if he had them, he did not recall them on rising. Nor could he fathom why this should be so. In fact, dreams, the world of dreams, did not exist for him as it existed for her. And unlike her, he did not sit before the dwindling fire of their hearth wondering, pondering, nagging the question really, What does this mean?

And she left. He watched the green shuttle stop, the driver lift in her gear, her sleep-creased face appear in a window. Then with a wave, a rapping of her stick against the pane, she was gone. He would have driven her to the airport had she wanted it. But no, she had wanted to leave her house heading directly into her journey. No long cuddles near the ticket counter, no second thoughts about whether they would be all right. It was like her to want it this way. No fuss. She would meet up with Avoa on the way, perhaps in Phoenix, and then the two of them would be off, as they seemed to manage to do now just about every year.

And feeling somewhat abandoned, *left*, he indulged his critical mind: She was not much of a housekeeper. He thought this while picking up one of his socks he'd discarded near the door. And grimaced at the inner critic. See, he said aloud, what do you know? He went inside the house, and while making a cup of coffee noticed a cobweb already beginning to attach itself to his cup. It made him laugh. To him, this was the way of Life. Turn your back for only a moment while the water boils

and you are lost in the scent of things to come, and Life puts out a tentacle to grab some part of you. Even the cup from which you prepare to drink is already being pulled if only so slightly back to the ground. A ground that moves, changes, endlessly, but is, paradoxically, always the same. Or it had been the same until, as the old ones used to say, here lately. These “old ones” were, generally speaking, her old ones, but she shared them with him; a quaintness of expression, a drollness of thought, that she seemed to garner directly from her dreams. She might awake laughing anytime whether day or night and expose him to frolicsome goings-on, pithy sayings, the oddest *bon mot* from perhaps a century or so ago. Sometimes he’d cry: “I don’t get it.” And she’d laugh harder and say: “Well, I guess you’d just have to have been there!”

He would miss her. He already did so. Nothing to do, immediately, but go back to bed. To burrow under a comforter still warm from her body, still fragrant with her always fresh, slightly spicy scent. In a room in which there were always flowers, and candles, and a feel of the music that she so often played. Haydn and Beethoven, of course, and also the Beatles, Robbie Robertson and the Red Road, and always and for endless hours, Sade and Al Green. Because *they* know how to love! she cried.

Drifting off into a minor squall of despair, an eddy of disappointment, and while hugging her pillow with the mixed emotions of loss, lust, and resentment, he fell asleep. And began immediately to dream. There is a path just ahead of him. Now he sees a large brown foot, hesitant, upon it. A green hobbitlike creature sits on its big toe, riding it as if it were a pony. The toe turns into a side trail. The trail disappears in the brush. The hobbit creature vanishes from sight, his green eyes, like his green leafy cap, sparkling. *You are lost, my boy*, the spirit being says.



*Wait!* he calls. *Which way to the river?*

His own shout, and the desperation with which he calls out, awakens him. He lies cradling her pillow, suddenly knowing it isn't over between them. That it will now never be, no matter that they may soon part. He has somehow joined her journey.

Hallelujah, he shouts, flinging aside the comforter, kicking away the covering quilt, giving her pillow a loud smack of a kiss, and heading jubilantly for the shower.

It blesses him. Never before, he feels, has he understood water. It cascades down his tight, healthy skin, and covers him, where the sun falls, with crystal beads of light. It astonishes him that in its purity, in its speed in covering his body, it has no scent. He smells only himself, earthy, rich, a friendly scent, he thinks, bemused, and the soap he holds, which is lemony. Also earthy, he thinks.

He thinks of how they met. She'd pursued him. After seeing one of his paintings of the desert. How can it move me so, she'd cried, gazing in rapture at a large canvas on which there was little other than space, sky, brown earth, and a large cactus. It is so empty!

Because emptiness, space, is our true home? he'd replied, amused by her enthusiasm, and that she'd called in the middle of the night to again pose the question.

It is, isn't it? she'd said, after a long pause. And the blue of your sky! she said.

He'd turned over in bed, happy not to have a wife beside him to disturb, and lit a cigarette. The habit of smoking (terrible, dumber than stupid, he knew) had taught him about emptiness, the need to fill internal space, the huge internal space existing within all of us, with Something. He was grateful he could smoke. Though he knew there were women who dis-

missed him the instant they saw him light up, because they could not imagine kissing him.

Do you know what O'Keeffe says about blue? he asked her, blowing out a cloud of smoke, warming to her voice, though he did not remember her face clearly from the opening night's exhibition.

What?

That it is the color that will remain after everything is destroyed.

He could feel her thinking. Savoring this idea. Her mind carrying her into the far reaches of the heavens, of space, long after there was no more earth.

But if we're not here to see it, she finally asked, will it still be blue?

He laughed, and asked her where she lived.

He recognized her immediately when he saw her again. And what he recognized was her energy, which seemed to precede her. As if her spirit were thrusting itself forward, into the unknown; dazzled, charmed, challenged, hopeful, happy to be energized by the mysterious, loving the adrenaline rush of surprise.

She was some years older than him and made no pretense of being younger. Her hair was graying; she would tell him later she was the sort who forgot to dye it, even when she tried to remember. She also felt humiliated to be eradicating some part of her hard-won existence. Don't people who try to look younger miss part of their lives? she queried, seriously. She also held a superstition she didn't tell him: that if you lied about your age, the number of years you took off were subtracted by the Universe. That's why so many people died sooner than they thought they would. She had her adequate cushion of estrogen fat on tummy and hips; her full breasts swung lower than ever before; her eyes

sparkled to find herself still vitally alive. An artist who was passionately enchanted by the real, however odd or *singular* it might be, he felt, almost at once, a sense of home. They stood, at that first meeting, simply measuring each other with their eyes. They were nearly equal in height. He thought, immediately, of what a boon that would be for kissing. If, in fact, she deigned to kiss a smoker. He thought it might prove a boon for other things. But he was modest, and tried, unsuccessfully, not to go there.

She offered him tea. And a peach that seemed to materialize, like a hare from a hat, out of the green velvet sleeve of her embroidered shirt.

And it had begun.

We met, really, she would tell friends later, laughing, over nothing. Over emptiness. Space. I couldn't believe how much of it he managed to get into his paintings, or how at home I felt in it.

He'd smiled to hear her describe it.

The moment I stood in front of any one of his paintings, she elaborated, my bird nature became activated. I felt I could fly!

Her bird nature? Where had he been, and with whom had he been, not to know there were people, women, who talked this way?

She must be New Age, he'd thought at first, shuddering.

## *River Run*

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PERHAPS ON THE FIRST DAY OF ANY RIVER TRAVEL one is apprehensive, one feels fear. She sat with her African-Eurasian friend Avoa, deep in the boat, not liking the heaviness of the life preserver, poppy orange, around her neck. The river, at the place they put on, was placid. Nonetheless she could feel its power in the swiftness with which the vehicles that brought their gear disappeared, as did, very soon, the flat and gravelly shore.

Large birds flew ahead of them toward the canyons, wheeling as they appeared and disappeared from view. Tentatively she placed a hand in the water. Icy cold. While overhead the sun rose higher in the sky, already warm, almost hot.

They were to be on the river nearly three weeks, long enough to traverse its entire length. Who would she be at the end of this journey?

Why are you going? her therapist had asked.

And she had sat looking behind her therapist's head, scanning the posters of horses on the wall, and replied:

I cannot believe my dry river, that we have been discussing

for months, and that is inside me, is unconnected to a wet one somewhere on the earth. I am being called, she said.

But the Colorado? Isn't it man-made?

In the beginning, no, she said, laughing to think of early man creating so mysterious and powerful a thing as a river. It is the river after all that carved the Grand Canyon.

But now, pursued the therapist, isn't it controlled by dams?

Controlled? I think not. Regulated? Maybe. Though she did not know this either. She admitted to being the kind of traveler who didn't prepare much before taking off. She'd found something to enjoy in her own ignorance. Oh, that's who's in that tomb! That's why they wear waist beads! Oh, now I understand all those thick dark garments in this heat. It's like carrying your own shadow and your shade! In the back of her mind she was already wondering if she would learn anything about how the Colorado's water managed to fill the bathtubs and swimming pools in Los Angeles. How was that possible? And what happens to a river—even a man-enhanced one—that flows continuously to a desert?

On the fourth day, and after experiencing her first rapids—her boat pitched higher than a house—she became ill. As the boat pitched and plunged down the river she felt herself slipping into the surrealness of a life lived now in a tiny bobbing space, very narrow, within the steep reddish canyon walls. Rushing madly, irresistibly onward, no stopping it. Yet at the end of each day they did stop. And on the evening of this particular day they stopped longer than usual to confer with her. Her temperature was 104. Did she wish to be evacuated? They could manage somehow to get a helicopter for her. Did she wish to go home?

The savage rushing of the river seemed to be inside her head, inside her body. Even while the oarswomen, their guides, were speaking to her, she had the impression she couldn't quite hear

them because of the roar. Not of the river that did indeed roar, just behind them, close to the simple shelter they'd made for her, but because of an internal roar as of the sound of a massive accumulation of words, spoken all at once, but collected over a lifetime, now trying to leave her body. As they rose to her lips, and in response to the question: Do you want to go home? she leaned over a patch of yellow grass near her elbow and threw up.

All the words from decades of her life filled her throat. Words she had said or had imagined saying or had swallowed before saying to her father, dead these many years. All the words to her mother. To her husbands. Children. Lovers. The words shouted back at the television set, spreading its virus of mental confusion.

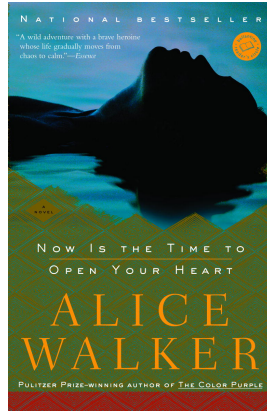
Once begun, the retching went on and on. She would stop, gasping for breath, rest a minute, and be off again. Draining her body of precious fluid, alarming Avoa and the oarswomen. Soon, exhausted, she was done.

No, she had said weakly, I don't want to go home. I'll be all right now.

Avoa's eyes were huge. Kate realized she must look a fright. She took the electrolyted water offered her, and later on, a tepid broth.

Really, she said, attempting to smile. I'll be fine.

All the women looked skeptical, but helped Avoa set up a proper camp.



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