

GERTRUDE STEIN'S LOVER

OCCUPYING THAT SPECIAL, INVISIBLE AREA historically reserved for homosexual partnerships, Gertrude Stein's relationship with her "companion," Alice Babette Toklas, was never entirely out in the open, but neither was it hidden from view. Between Gertrude and Alice, however, the nature of the relationship was unshakably clear. On the occasion of an early trip to Florence, Gertrude professed her love to Alice with the intention of entreating Toklas into marriage: "Pet me tenderly and save me from alarm. . . . A wife hangs on her husband that is what Shakespeare says a loving wife hangs on her husband that is what she does." Toklas wept and wept, and accepted: "She came and saw and seeing cried I am your bride."

Alice B. Toklas grew up in San Francisco to a middle-class Jewish family. Her father had come to California as a prospective miner but soon found more luck as a merchant. With hopes of one day becoming a classical pianist, Alice studied music for a couple of years at the University of Washington before her mother died in 1897, leaving her responsible for the men of the house. With no desire to marry a man, she found herself trapped. She eventually managed to secure a loan to get herself to Paris on September 8, 1907. On that same day she met Gertrude Stein.

The nurturing of Stein's brilliance was Toklas's primary occupation for most of her life. At 27, rue de Fleurus, the house in Paris where they lived together for forty years, hosting salons to some of the twentieth century's most influential artists and writers, Toklas was in charge of the household. In one famous anecdote, a photographer arrives to take pictures of Stein for a magazine spread. He asks her to engage in any everyday activity, such as unpacking her airplane bag, to which she replies, "Miss Toklas always does that." Talking on the telephone then? "Miss Toklas always does that." Stein drolly suggests he take pictures of her drinking some water, or taking her hat on and off.

Everyone at 27, rue de Fleurus had an opinion on Toklas and Stein's relationship, and Toklas, often seen as dark and self-effacing in the presence of the charismatic Stein, was under particular scrutiny. (To poet James Merrill her raspy voice was "like a viola at dusk"; Picasso's mistress Françoise

Gilot likened it to a "sharpening of the scythe.") Draping herself in dramatic robes and ghostly colors, Toklas often found herself charged with entertaining the other "wives of geniuses."

"I always wanted to be historical," Stein said before she died. "From almost a baby on, I felt that way about it." But if Stein hadn't met Toklas, it seems likely she would have given up on the whole genius of modernism endeavor. Not only did Toklas provide a constant flow of encouragement and praise that Stein needed to keep going, she also typed up her notebooks and prepared them for publishers. It was Alice who helped popularize Stein's trademark modernist phrase "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"; she came across it while typing up *Geography and Plays* and insisted that Stein employ it as a device.

But not all of Toklas's influence on Stein's work was so generative. For years, Stein scholars puzzled over Toklas's typed version of *Stanzas in Meditation*. In the manuscript, every mention of the word *may* is crossed out violently and changed to *can* with no regard for context or sound. Eventually, Stein scholars solved the mystery: Alice had suspected that the word *may* referred to one of Gertrude's former lovers, May Bookstaver, and demanded Stein remove its every mention.

After Stein died, Toklas published a cookbook that would achieve cult-like status for its eccentric recipes (particularly notable was its recipe for Hashish Fudge, which included figs, almonds, and cannabis). But her focus continued to be tending to Stein's literary estate and reputation. And, though Stein's will granted her "friend Alice B. Toklas" full rights to her estate and painting collection, the provision was not enough to save Toklas from poverty. Without official recognition of their union, Toklas was left very vulnerable. One day she came home to empty spaces in their apartment at 5, rue Christine, where paintings that she had lived with for more than half a century (works by Matisse, Picasso, Gauguin, Renoir, Manet, and others) had once hung; in Toklas's absence, Stein's niece had pillaged the apartment. Soon thereafter, Alice B. Toklas was evicted. She died penniless a few years later.