

Women and Cars

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We were caught in the snow and I was sure that we were on the wrong road and wanted to turn back. Wrong or right, said Gertrude Stein, we are going on. She could not back the car very successfully. She goes forward admirably, she does not go backwards successfully.

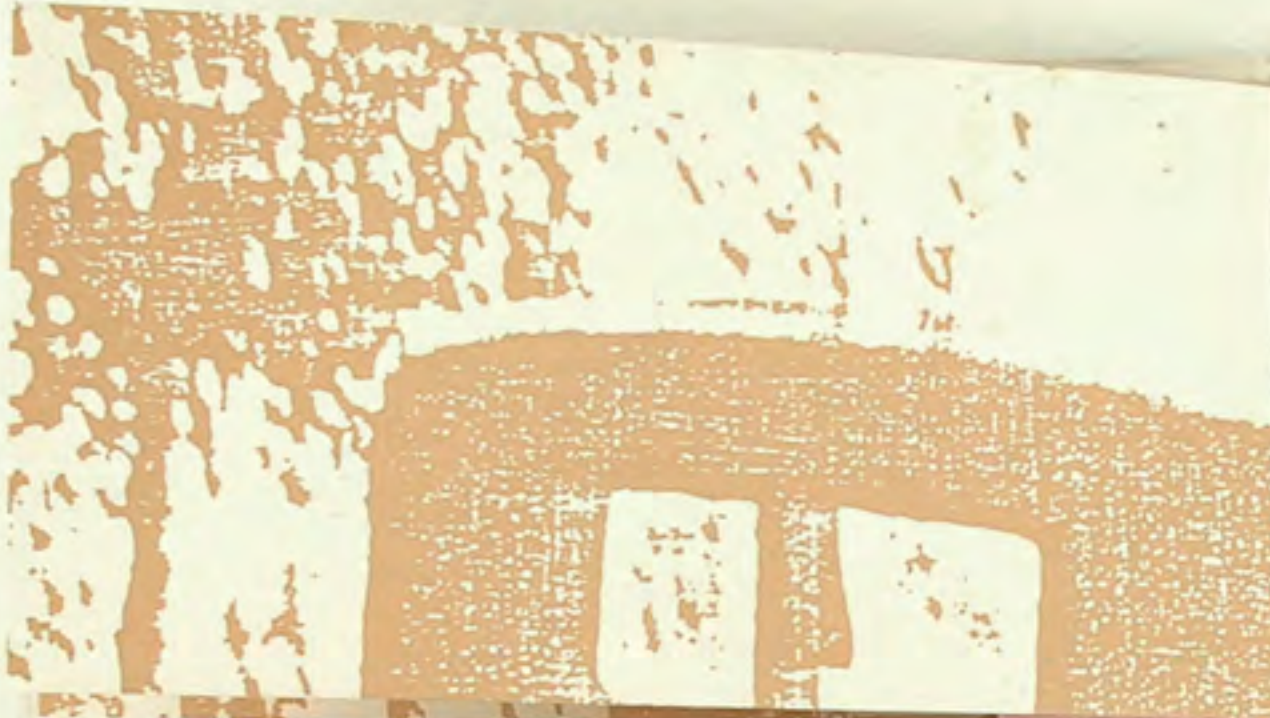
Gertrude Stein, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas

It was different when there were just girls in the car. When they were with boys, they never were the ones who drove. They didn't drive 100 mph to anything, not even a rock concert. They mostly drove in circles, around to one another's houses, over to the stores and back. The wildest thing they ever did was run Nancy's mother's stationwagon into a ditch, or cruise Jerry's Drive-in looking for the boys.



She couldn't remember anybody but her driving all those Sundays down to the river. A car of them, with lots of cracks about women drivers, and as many people as would fit in the VW convertible. They thought they were going to the French Riviera. And could have been. They never went into the water, just lay on the beach and read appropriate literature: anything about Paris in the twenties, or anything that made them feel more or less existential, depending on their moods.





Our little ford was almost ready. She was later to be called Auntie after Gertrude Stein's aunt Pauline who always behaved admirably in emergencies and behaved fairly well most times if she was properly flattered.

Gertrude Stein, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas

The aunts were as different as their cars and their sides of the families. One came like clockwork, at dinner time, in a succession of Buicks. She sat perched on the piano bench, without taking off the great coat while she told stories of the days' adventures—the jangle of silver bracelets, or her favorite expressions, “my stars,” thrown in for emphasis. Her car took us to wonderful lunches, the theater, and on big city shopping trips.



The other aunt appeared periodically, as if from nowhere. Sometimes in a Jeep, sometimes in a Cadillac. Trailing a string of gifts from a winter spent in Florida—a carton of real oranges or a plastic purse with shells glued on top. Sometimes with a dog that did tricks. Her car arrived at the end of the school year with the smell of orange blossoms and the promise of unremembered summer pleasure.



She parked her car at the side of the road and took a flashlight from the glove compartment. In anticipation of finding the answer to the riddle, Nancy crossed the field, and as she came closer she realized that it was indeed the entrance to a rocky cave.

Carolyn Keene, Nancy Drew. The Hidden Staircase.

It was never clear whether she'd bought the car over there or over here. It didn't matter. She drove the car as if she were still in Italy. When she repainted it yellow, everybody thought it was the right choice. It had all the attributes of a small italian handbag. Charm, a dash of wit, style, and like all material possessions that are the perfect choice, it gave them hope. It was absurd to drive a car of this size on the freeways. It seemed to run on leaps of faith. When she, when everyone, bought new cars ten years later, it seemed to mark the end of youth.



Before moving to California, her cars had always been named by others. Her mother had named the first one. BT the next. Once in Los Angeles, the problem of transportation becomes more serious, and more intimate. The first car, Frieda, came with remnants of a previous owner. The serape and small religious relic made that lean year seem safe. Followed by Blanche, from *Streetcar*, a white southern lady dependent on the kindness of strangers, but who seemed to run forever.





She rolled her Daddy's cars. Three cars in as many years. News of her exploits seemed to be received telepathically. She had last been seen in town at a holiday party, her partner dancing with a lampshade on his head. Dan always told about how she had almost killed them all the icy night she skidded the wrong way down Maxwell Street and into the telephone pole. He made it sound as if she had done that, and everything else, on purpose.

She opened the driver's door and the silver upholstery looked so ragged I could have cried. Taped with the same green tape bandages as before except there were more rips than I remembered. We had joked and driven the green truck together for more than a year. . . .

Susan King, Passport



When we finally met years later, it was hard to reconcile the stories with the person. She was in another phase of her life. She lived in a place where there was never ice on the road. Ever. She had the ability to change herself, change everything about her reality and have you believe it. After she moved uptown, she no longer drove her father's Mercedes, or the truck. Her pink MG convertible almost matched the pink lightning bolts in her hair.





*I like to ride the fast lane
es muy caliente
and under me a red chile siren
pepper-peppers Alvarado with cop sauce
as I cross*

Eloise Klein Healy, A Packet Beating Like a Heart

They both had blond hair and red cars. They both had been born into money. The one who had old money was not the one who was always changing. But this is not about changing fortune. The one with new money was always changing everything. It is already hard to remember what color her car was before she brought it home painted red. She had changed its color as effortlessly as she might change color of lipstick. She had once worn lipstick. She had changed that, too. When she grew tired of even the color red, she traded the car in for a silver one.



The one born into old money was changing slowly. Her picture appeared in magazines and people wrote articles about her. She still has her red car, and you can't imagine her without blond hair. They both still listen to italian tapes while driving the freeways. One puts the top down and listens to opera. The other one listens to italian songs. Some things never change.





Nancy drove leisurely along a winding country road. A gray automobile followed some distance behind. She did not give it a second thought until she had gone several miles.

"Why doesn't that car pass me?" Nancy wondered.

Carolyn Keene, Nancy Drew. The Quest of the Missing Map.

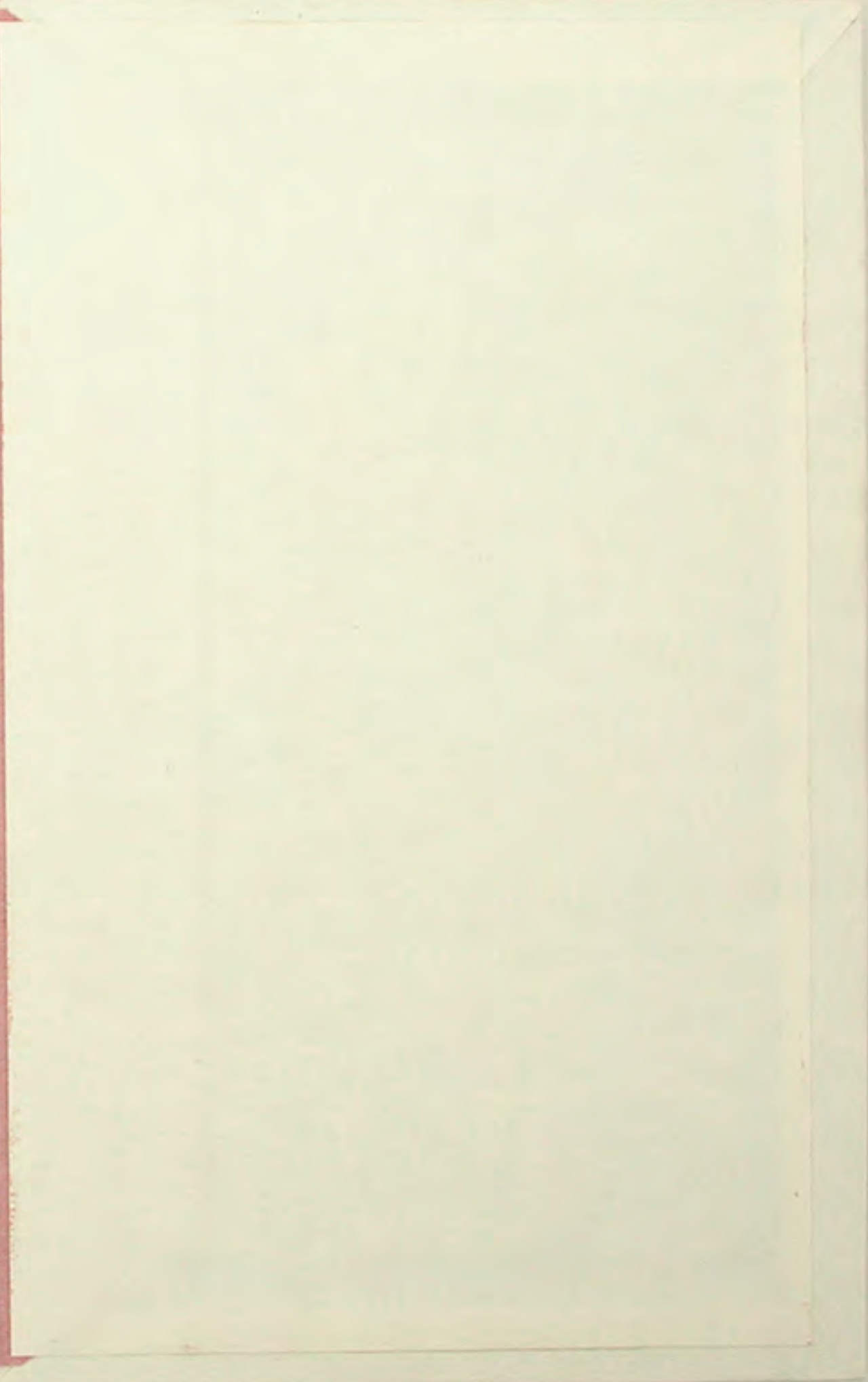
Every other Ladies' Day she found herself at the carwash. It was a strange landscape. A man in a business suit sat drinking coffee at a picnic table that slanted precariously down the steep grade of asphalt. People looked misplaced once they stepped from their cars. There was nothing to do but watch giant sudsy brushes roll over cars that now were free from owners.



She thought about how she used to spend all of her free money on hair spray and magazines when she was in high school. She figured this was the same. This small conceit of the car wash. It made everything they say about L.A. true. This concern for appearances. Yet every time the tiny car rolled out the other side and sparkled, she felt as good as she used to at the beauty parlor. The cares of the week dropped from her shoulders, and she could face anything.



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