



MEDICINE MEN

a novel

ALICE
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Alfred A. Knopf New York 1997

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Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York,
and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Distributed by Random House, Inc., New York.

<http://www.randomhouse.com/>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Adams, Alice, [date]

Medicine men : a novel / by Alice Adams. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-679-45440-3

I. Title.

PS3551.D324M44 1997

813'.54—dc20

96-42001

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

Published April 15, 1997

Reprinted Once

Third Printing, April 1997

ALSO BY ALICE ADAMS

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MEDICINE MEN

*For Dr. Allen Wheelis,
who was always kind
and often brilliant*

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

The text of this book was set in Simoncini Garamond, a modern version by Francesco Simoncini of the type attributed to the famous Parisian type cutter Claude Garamond (ca. 1480–1561). Garamond was a pupil of Geoffroy Tory and is believed to have based his letters on the Venetian models, although he introduced a number of important differences, and it is to him that we owe the letter we know as old-style. He gave to his letters a certain elegance and a feeling of movement that won for their creator an immediate reputation and the patronage of Francis I of France.

*Composed by ComCom,
an R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company,
Allentown, Pennsylvania*

*Printed and bound by Quebecor Printing,
Fairfield, Pennsylvania*

Designed by Dorothy S. Baker

MEDICINE MEN

ONE

For a long time, Molly Bonner's strongest reaction to doctors was a fear that they would bore her to death. Seeing her come into their offices every year or so, and perceiving a visibly healthy (thin, clear-skinned, clear-eyed) youngish woman, and soon recognizing a good listener, they all began to talk. Molly had grown up in Richmond, Virginia, trained to listen to men and to laugh at their jokes—true of all women, of course, but even more so if they are Southern.

Her internist, Dr. Douglas Macklin, from Boston, talked about his impressions of San Francisco, contrasting the two cities; her gynecologist, Dr. Summers, talked politics—or, rather, he lectured her on the evils of Southern Republicans, which she was not. Dr. Gold, the dentist, spoke of travel, which in his case meant hotel prices and Frequent Flyer bargains.

These men all struck Molly as more than a little nuts, with their endless, not very interesting obsessions, but since she had no medical problem to contribute at the time, she let them go on talking. She also had some superstitious fear that if they talked about medical matters she would develop something or other, a fear that some years of working as a temp in medical offices had done nothing to allay. And all those men were a couple of gen-

erations older than Molly was; since each had been recommended by one of the others, they formed a more or less coherent group of middle-aged white males.

Contrary to received opinion, and prejudice, the doctor who seemed the sanest, as well as the least boring, was a psychoanalyst, Dr. Edgar Shapiro, whom Molly went to after the accidental death (in a helicopter crash) of her second husband, Paul West, a daredevil documentary filmmaker. For Molly, there was not only the shock and pain of Paul's death—she had loved him in many ways; Paul was wild and handsome and funny, intelligent and sexy—but there was also moral confusion. They had been on the verge of separating, and the death had left her rich. Paul did not like being married; they were both too young, he said. Molly disagreed, they were almost forty; how old did you have to be? She supposed he meant that, unmarried, he would feel younger, which was no doubt true. She also supposed that he meant that he hankered after younger women. In any case, she had not argued, but agreed to separate—and he so suddenly, horribly died.

The money complication came about because wild, crazy, adventurous Paul had a not wild brother, Matthew, who sold insurance. Who had sold Paul a policy that paid for an accidental death.

Grieving, and very confused, not sleeping well and given to headaches, Molly asked Dr. Macklin what to do, and he recommended Dr. Shapiro. "He's supposed to be the best in town. Probably charges a lot."

He did charge a lot, but he was both smart and kind, and sometimes even funny. He kept to the subject, Molly, and he managed to help. Molly came to feel that she was just a grief-struck and rattled person, not a permanently crippled one. In a practical way he pointed out that she now had a lot of choices, which they discussed—including giving away all the money. Or starting up a homeless shelter, something like that.

In any case, except for Dr. Shapiro, for a long time most doc-

tors simply bored Molly. She did not share the medical panics experienced by some of her friends, for whom a mammogram was a major trauma. Nor, God knows, did she feel the sexual turn-on that doctors seemed to inspire in her beautiful friend Felicia Flood, who was for a long time involved with the famous heart surgeon Dr. Raleigh Sanderson, although she was not exactly faithful to him—but that is to get far ahead of the story.

And then, for medical reasons Molly was involved with a great many doctors all at once—and with another one in another way: he fell in love with her, obsessively, angrily.

In the years since Paul's death, Molly had not "gone out" except with old friends: women, gay guys, sometimes couples. She had even imagined that part of her life to be over and done, despite what Dr. Shapiro and all her friends said to the contrary. She did not have much sense about men, was one of her conclusions, since her first very early marriage had not been a big success either.

But she did agree, one June, to come to a party at Felicia's at which Felicia admitted that there was to be someone, a friend of Dr. Sandy's, whom she might like. Since Molly did not much like Dr. Raleigh Sanderson, this was not promising, but she said yes, she would come.

"He's younger than Sandy, a little, and his wife died a year or so ago," Felicia said. "He's tall and thin, sort of handsome. You might like him. I don't know him very well, but he seems okay. Dave Jacobs. He practices in Marin."

This party took place on a magically warm star-sprinkled night in June—San Francisco is never warm at night in June. It was out in Felicia's careless, generous, and lovely garden, which smelled of jasmine and garlic, the garlic from Felicia's famous fish soup, the jasmine blooming everywhere that night. Arriving late, a calculation, Molly stood there for a moment, assailed by those scents, smiling but not recognizing anyone at first. Until

Felicia floated forward, in something pale and gauzy, and kissed her. "Oh, how wonderful, you're here." Felicia, smelling floral, her long hair loose, blond silk. She whispered, "And Sandy's here."

This was unusual. Sandy, married to rich fat alcoholic Connie, did not in a public way come often to Felicia's house, but every now and then he did. As though officially to stake his claim, Molly thought, which was probably unfair.

A long table, white-clothed, was set up at the end of the garden, near the azaleas and rhododendrons, the roses, around which people now clustered, drinking white wine and inhaling the soup's strong sea-and-garlic aroma. Felicia had announced that the soup was still too hot.

"I don't care what you say, I've never had a bad meal in Paris," a somewhat shrill, didactic male voice announced just as Molly was sitting down and greeting friends in a talk-to-you-later way. "And I've never had a really good one in London."

The speaker—an almost bald though still handsome man, big dark-brown eyes and very large strong white teeth—Molly instantly identified as the proffered David Jacobs; he must be, since there was no one else whom she had not at least met before. Her first thought was, Good, I'm not at all attracted, and I'm not ready for attraction, for sex and all that trouble. Also she thought he sounded a little like Dr. Gold, her travelling, sententious dentist. And though she and Paul had had at least a couple of bad meals in Paris, plus some very good ones in London, she said nothing at the time. "I thought you agreed with me, you were wearing that lovely amiable smile," Dave later told her, and she answered, smiling, "I just don't like to argue. Much easier just to be amiable."

Molly and Dave were introduced, and Molly was welcomed by several people, who complained that they hadn't seen her for a while.

Felicia announced that the soup was ready, and conversation

shifted from foreign food to praises of Felicia: just the right amount of garlic, everyone said, and Sandy Sanderson added, "And great fish. From Swan's?"

"No. The Cal-Mart."

Molly and Felicia had met and become almost instant friends some ten years back, when they were both office temps: Molly because she and her first husband, Henry Starck, a Portland (Maine) lawyer, had just divorced and she had not come out well. And Felicia because, though her parents were both rich and generous, she was basically lazy, workwise; she liked earning just enough to get by, and she liked even more the variety of people and circumstances that such work provided. Molly saw herself at that time as "deciding what to do," an interim period for her. As she saw it she would think and make plans—whereas Felicia generally succeeded in living from moment to moment.

Thus, all those years ago, Molly had been a witness of the first days of Felicia and Sandy, Dr. Sanderson. Felicia had gone to work in his office and talked about him quite a lot. And then, for a year or so, she talked about him all the time.

"He's terrifically attractive" was the first thing that Felicia said. "And wow, he really knows it. That swashbuckling walk. I've heard he was a football star at Harvard. The other surgeons all imitate the way he walks, it's funny to watch them crossing the street behind him. His team. He sure learned my name right off. Miss Flood. I've heard his wife is an alcoholic, and really rich. Doctors, honestly. I think he's sort of coming on to me, I don't know. I sort of hope not, I'm so weak that way, and I do have this thing about doctors, I know I do. All those med students when I was at Wellesley.

"Guess what? We had lunch together. I thought he meant just a sandwich someplace near the hospital, but no, down into

the parking level where his Jag is—of course a Jag—and down to this quiet little place off Union Street. They seemed to know him, so I asked him, 'Do you always take your secretaries out to lunch?' He said, 'Not secretaries, beautiful women.' Which is kind of a snotty, sexist remark, if you think about it. But I guess he was being gallant—my dad sort of talks like that too. He's a lot nicer than I thought—Sandy, I mean. We talked about—oh, a lot of stuff. He's really very smart. For a doctor." She laughed. "But he did keep looking at me, you know? I was not entirely surprised when this great box of flowers arrived last night. I guess he got my address from Personnel, and he sort of knows my mom and dad. Just with a note about thanks for lunch."

And then more flowers. Another lunch. Or lunches. And then, "Well, you know, I couldn't fight him off anymore. I said I was weak. And Sandy's so—so powerful. So intense. He really comes on. Besides, by then I was in love."

By then Molly had met Paul West, and she too was in love, or nearly, and so she listened to Felicia with even more than her usual sympathetic interest. At first it was a way of not talking about Paul, which, distrustful of both their feelings, hers and Paul's, she did not want to do. She knew he was dangerous.

"Oh, I know," Felicia went on, and on and on. "Married, etcetera. Something bad to do to another woman. But I hear she's drunk all the time, and I'm sure I'm not the first extra lady in his life. Or probably the last. But in the meantime, I have to say, it's terrific. Sandy is really a piece of work. And he's interesting. I guess I like hearing about medical stuff. No good can come of this," Felicia said, with her sly cat's smile. "But in the meantime . . ."

Molly's own relationship with Raleigh Sanderson was lopsided. Odd. On the one hand, she felt that she knew him well, through Felicia; certainly he was a strong presence in her life. On the other hand, she had almost no personal contact with him at all. Two years ago, when Paul was killed, there had been a

great sheaf of flowers, gladioli (Molly disliked gladioli, but never mind; it was the thought), and a card, engraved *Dr. Raleigh Sanderson*. And, handwritten, "I'm very sorry for your loss." That was really very kind, Molly thought, and at that time it occurred to her that Felicia must have talked a lot about her too. "Poor Molly, she's all broken up, she's just not herself . . ."

Well, by now she was herself again, or nearly; since early spring she had been extremely uncomfortable with what she assumed were allergies, or sinus problems—new to her, and seeming not to go away. However, the best way to deal with physical symptoms was to ignore them, Molly thought, and so she had, pretty much.

Now, at the party, anxious to impress Sandy with her general well-being (no matter what Felicia had said), she turned to him, taking up his remark about Swan's. "It is a great source, though," she agreed. "And so much fun to go there and eat oysters."

"If you still dare eat oysters at all." He grinned at her. "And I do."

There followed a brief, boring, but animated discussion of purveyors of fresh fish, with Molly and Sandy smiling and nodding most amiably at each other, as though in the process of notable discoveries.

Actually, Molly's allergies, or sinuses, or whatever, had lately taken the form of an extreme heaviness inside her head, and a general, overall physical lassitude. Frequent very sharp headaches, to which she was not generally given. Occasionally she would mention these symptoms to a friend, or even in a social group, although usually she did not make such complaints; often someone else would have initiated the conversation with his or her own symptoms. In any case, the invariable response would come: "Oh, this is the worst pollen season ever. The drought. The rains. The plants."

Dr. Macklin, her internist, had said more or less all this him-

self, interspersed with an account of his projected fall trip down the coast of Maine to Boston; "I can't stand missing a New England fall," he said, as he said every year. He did add that his own allergies had been at their worst this year, and he prescribed an antibiotic that had helped his wife (an actress, a red-haired beauty), also allergic, but that so far had had no good effect on Molly. In fact, it seemed to her that she felt somewhat worse.

And tonight she felt even worse than usual; she wondered if she could be allergic to some flower or flowering shrub in Felicia's overflowing garden. Or to garlic? or fish, or wine? Or could this be some neurotic response to the presence of so many doctors? Molly smiled at this, aware that even Dr. Shapiro would find it unlikely. Excusing herself from the table, she went back into the house and into Felicia's downstairs bathroom, where she found some Advil among a jungle of prescription pills, which, as a decent friend, she did not examine—and lipsticks and mascara, which she did.

Returning, coming back outside to the table, Molly thought that she might just casually mention her malaise—introducing it as a topic, so to speak. Taking advantage of the presence of so many doctors. But of course she did nothing of the sort.

"... for real climbing, I just don't think you can beat the Tetons," she heard from the dark, gravelly voice of Sandy Sanderson.

And then, somewhat testily aggressive, Dave Jacobs: "Mont Blanc, in my book, is absolutely tops. The views, and the food—"

Sandy: "Oh well, if you climb for food—"

"Of course I don't, but it helps."

Felicia's lovely voice broke in. "Oh honestly, you guys. Whoever wants to climb all those mountains, anyway? I'd much rather go to the beach, and just lie there. But then I'm basically lazy."

"The beach is hell on your skin," Sandy told her, as he must