



MEN  
GIVING  
MONEY,

INTERSECTING STORIES

WOMEN  
YELLING

ALICE MATTISON

"Deliriously uncanny and apt . . . *Men Giving Money, Women Yelling* left me craving . . . many more helpings of Mattison's crusty, delicately textured fiction."

--*The New York Times Book Review*

MEN GIVING MONEY, WOMEN YELLING

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mattison, Alice.

Men giving money, women yelling : intersecting stories / Alice Mattison.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-688-16106-5

I. Title.

PS3563.A8598M46 1997

813'.54—dc21

96-47658

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

First Quill Edition 1998

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

BOOK DESIGN BY LEAH S. CARLSON

[www.williammorrow.com](http://www.williammorrow.com)

THIS BOOK IS FOR

Jacob, Ben, Andrew, and Lara,  
my dear and clever companions and children.

*And it is also for Janie.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'D LIKE TO THANK James (J. J.) Jones, who told me Kent's story in "Broken." Additional thanks go to the Corporation of Yaddo, to the Community Soup Kitchen, and to Edward, Sandi, Joyce, Don, Lloyd, Bridget, Jude, Claire, the other Alice, and all my Susans.

Some of these stories appeared first in journals: "We Two Grown-ups" and "Selfishness" in *The New Yorker*, "River-tossing" (with the title "Confusion City") in *Boston Review*, "Pekko's Boat" in *North American Review*, "Home Home" in *New England Review*, "The Dance Teacher" in *Southern Humanities Review*, "Last Wash" in *Boulevard*, "Sebastian Squirrel" in *Glimmer Train*.

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## WE TWO GROWN-UPS

TODAY WAS THE happiest day of my life so far, even though it didn't include actual sex or the World Series, and even though as usual people are suffering in places famous for trouble and also of course in every other place. I live with my parents—to save money—although as my mother puts it I am a grown man. I just filled my parents' dishwasher after dinner, wondering as I turned it on whether it really was the happiest day—because other days had more potential—but it was. I think that until today the happiest day was the day I went camping with my first girlfriend and we saw two deer and swam nude and made love on top of the sleeping bag, near the fire. Earlier happy days mostly included home runs. Dinner tonight was only meat loaf. Lunch was pizza. The happy part was in between.

I went to Wilbur Cross High School, in New Haven, where Ida Feldman, who had an old lady's name but was young and blond, though fat, was my English teacher junior year. One day, an administrator was talking on the public-address system, and he said, "Any seniors wishing to take the SATs should make an appointment with their penis." Ms. Feldman flopped forward on her desk and laughed, her arms wide, her hair spread out, as if she'd fallen off a dock with surprise and lay helpless in the water. Her face pressed



into her grade book, so when she picked up her head there was a groove on her cheek from the spiral binding.

I loved her from then on. I majored in English at Southern Connecticut, almost in her honor, even though everyone was majoring in business. Two different deans asked me, "What are you going to do with *that*?" Whenever I visited Ms. Feldman she remembered me, but I wasn't as important to her as what she was doing right then. One time, she was trying to get a pregnant girl to stay in school and at least think about an abortion. "I wouldn't say it to her, Tom," she said quickly. "But I have to think of a way to let it cross her mind."

I hadn't thought much about abortion. "But it's her *baby*," I said.

"If I wanted her to abort her after-school job at Wendy's," she said, "I wouldn't be crying about it." I could see then that she did look blotchy. When I remember that day now, I know she was letting me right in, but then I was uncomfortable. I didn't stay and talk.

Ms. Feldman didn't look sexy, at least the way we think sexy women are supposed to look—she looked bouncy and dreamy at once, with her weight and her waist-length blond hair, and I'll argue now that this is precisely what we mean by sexy, but then I wouldn't have. But she always had to do with sex one way or another. Talking about literature in her class, we found sex everywhere, even the Gettysburg Address. But it was more than that. If spiders made love on a window at Cross, they'd pick Ms. Feldman's window.

When I got out of college I went to work for my brother-in-law. He's a contractor who builds additions to houses and does renovations. He's a noisy man. When he started going out with my sister, who was living at home, he always sat back too fast in the lounge chair at our house, late at night, so it crashed open. We'd sit up in bed and know Barbara had brought John home. At work

he doesn't listen to the radio, but he drops things and sets boxes down hard, or lets go of an armful of two-by-fours half a foot off the floor. And he talks in a loud voice. From the first, if we were working on an addition to a house and the people were home, they heard me get instructed, because I knew nothing—John took me on out of kindness, or maybe he knew that English majors were meant to build additions. The first day, a woman was sitting in a rocker breast-feeding her baby next to the open window, and as I looked over John's shoulder into the window, I could see the interest in her face when he explained loudly to me that he always cut outside the line and I must do the same, so our pieces of wood would be interchangeable.

"What line?" I said.

"The line you draw." He was using a temporary sawhorse he'd set up in this woman's backyard, and now he drew a fine pencil line where he needed to cut, and sure enough, he cut on the outside of the line, so it was just visible on the edge of the board. I could hardly pay attention. I wanted to look at the woman, maybe to go in and show her the line. Her baby was looking over his shoulder at me, too.

I did everything wrong the first few months with John, but he liked having me around anyway. "A college graduate like yourself . . ." he'd begin, while we were hammering together. I learned to get nervous when he said that. "Tell me why a woman's nipples get brown if she nurses a baby," he said recently. So he'd been watching that woman, too—watching more closely than I'd been. I wouldn't talk about her. We'd finished that house long since, of course.

"I was an English major," I said.

"So you know about England?"

"I read a lot of American literature," I said. "Did you ever hear of Ezra Pound?"

He wasn't sure. I told him Pound was a good poet who made anti-Semitic broadcasts during the Second World War. "Now, do we forget the poetry because the man was wrong—or crazy; I guess people think he was crazy—or do we read the poems anyway?"

John talked about that one for days, dropping into a room where I was working alone to ask, "Are the poems against the Jews?" and "How good are they, anyway?" On the whole he thought we should not read Pound, but he could see arguments either way. Finally, he said I should show him a poem by Pound. I didn't know what had made me think of Pound. I hadn't read much of his work. I said I'd find my Norton anthology and have something copied.

John and I also talked about sex.

"There's a year in everybody's life when all you think about is sex," he said, implying that I was in it. "Then you remember it's not the only thing."

"When you're young," he said to me more than once, "sex comes by itself, but as you get older, it sneaks into things and things sneak into it." Barbara is having a baby. I knew that had something to do with what he meant. But I also thought he was noticing what I kept noticing—the way people were near us and yet far away when we worked on their houses. That first, breast-feeding lady—she'd pass by, usually carrying the baby, wearing a bathrobe. She didn't look sloppy but mysterious, like a woman in a misty dress in a damp meadow on the box of some feminine hygiene product.

IT INTERESTS ME to work in someone's house, but it's easier when the house is empty. Sometimes John gets ~~contracts to~~ renovate houses that are being made into residences for retarded people or some other group. There are special requirements—extra fire exits, wheelchair accessibility. Just now John and I are renovating a house where psychiatric patients will live. We have to put in two complete

bathrooms. Today John said we could quit early because he had to go to the dentist. An old filling had been bothering him. "What do you think?" he's been asking me. "Will he drill again?"

We quit installing plumbing at three. John has a plumber he uses for tapping into the sewer pipe, but we install sinks and toilets and bathtubs ourselves, and of course we also do wiring and put in heating ducts and so forth. John had taught me to set the wax ring that seals a toilet in place, and this was the first one I did entirely on my own. I'd ruined a few wax rings before.

John had to send some contracts to the state, and before he left he asked me to take them to the Federal Express office when I was done cleaning up. I have my own key to the house—we each have one, so it doesn't matter who arrives first in the morning. After locking up, I decided to stop at home on my way downtown and pick up the Norton anthology so I could have some Ezra Pound copied. There's a copy place right near the FedEx office on Whitney Avenue.

I come and go, and my mother tries not to be nosy. She was home when I came in. "Did you ever send anything Federal Express?" I asked her.

"Of course. My boss sends things all the time."

"How do you do it?"

"They don't take cash," she said. "You fill out a form."

"Did you ever read Ezra Pound?" I said. I didn't know which poem to copy.

"I don't think so."

When I walked into the FedEx office the woman behind the counter saw me looking around and pointed to a table at the side, and when I looked over there, the first thing I saw was a big, worn-out, turquoise-colored bag—one of those Danish schoolbags—and my stomach lurched, because it looked so familiar and yet as if it came from far away. Ms. Feldman had carried that bag, or carried

one just like it, always with straps and buckles dangling, and there she was, in a green raincoat, her blond hair spread out over her shoulders. When I approached, she put the bag on the floor without turning around. She was filling out a form.

"Ms. Feldman," I said. That is, we weren't on a first-name basis yet—except that she'd always called me Tom. She was going to be Ida within seconds, but right then she was still Ms. Feldman.

"What are you doing here, Tom?" she said. I explained about the contracts and the state and carpentry, and we stood there, leaning on the table and talking. She seemed the same age as she did when I was in high school and she was a new teacher. She reached her arm in front of my face to point out where I should write what on the form. The sleeve of her sweater, sticking out from her coat, was a soft, dark pink, and I wanted to touch it. As slowly as possible, I copied the address John had given me. Several things had happened, and I was trying to round them up, like marbles rolling in different directions. "Ida," I said, to get used to calling her Ida, for a start.

"What?" She'd gone back to her own form.

"What are you sending?"

She put the turquoise bag on the table between us again, and looked at me with a spark in her eyes, and then she took a long, thin loaf of French bread out of her bag. "I'm sending it to my mother," she said.

"Why?"

"I baked it." The loaf didn't fit in the envelope, and she broke off six inches. Then it fit at a slant.

"Won't it be stale?" I said.

"Of course." She laughed. She put the rest of the bread on the table and we sealed our envelopes. "Or maybe not," she said then.

The next thing to get used to was that I wanted her just as much as I did when I was seventeen. Wanting Ida unfolded again like an umbrella that had been in my closet all that time—a big golf um-

brella in six colors. And what seemed even better, as we carried our envelopes to the unsmiling woman who'd been there all along but didn't seem to be listening, was that we were now the same age. When we met I was seventeen and I suppose she was twenty-three—a woman and a boy. But six years don't count, once you're grown up.

Ida broke the remaining bread in half as we left the FedEx office, and we ate it. Even without butter, it was excellent. She paused as we reached the sidewalk, wiping her mouth, then brushing crumbs off her front. Instead of saying good-bye, I asked her about Ezra Pound, and we thumbed through the anthology. "The first Canto, I guess," she said. "What made you think of Pound?"

"I don't know," I said. "We were nailing up molding and he just came to mind."

"*Pounding* those nails, I suppose," she said.

I groaned and said, "Come with me to get it copied"—and though it seems simple, this was the hardest thing, but once it was said, everything was different. I was trying out the new way we were going to be—we two grown-ups.

"Does it bother you that he was anti-Semitic?" I asked, as we went into the copy shop. Feldman was a Jewish name, I realized.

"You think I *like* it that he was anti-Semitic?"

"But you read him anyway?"

"Now and then." And she read aloud—dramatically, while people turned and watched—from the Canto:

And then went down to the ship,  
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and  
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,  
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward

Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,  
 Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.

At "trim-coifed goddess," she stuck out one hip and touched her hair, shaking it back with a funny gesture. "It's so good to see you!" she said.

But I don't think she knew yet. She didn't know we were going to be lovers. "Want to see the toilet I just installed?" I said.

"Bread, plumbing," she said. "Very able people."

"I'd like to talk," I said and shrugged.

"I have to be someplace," she said, "but not for two hours."

With a copy of Pound's first Canto in my pocket, we walked to my car. She had come on foot. I'd parked legally, I hadn't been towed or ticketed, the contracts were on their way to Hartford, and Ida Feldman was sitting in my car while I wanted her just as much as I did at seventeen, when I pressed my face into the pillow at night, as if she were waiting under it and I could gnaw through and reach her.

The house we're working on is a big, frame one-family with a porch, owned by a nonprofit group. I guess the state chipped in, or maybe they just sent the rules over: a rail near the tub and a ramp in case there's a wheelchair user, sprinklers in the kitchen, and so forth. I felt proud of the house, fitting my key in the lock while Ida peered in the porch window.

I turned on the lights. The electricity is on, so we can use power tools and see what we're doing, but there's no heat yet. We kept our coats on. I took her through the first floor, letting myself touch her elbow to guide her. She did a little dance in the living room to say it was big—you know how people signal that a room is almost a ballroom.

"But I haven't seen your toilet." She loved the bathrooms, she said. She was impressed that John and I could make bathrooms

where none had been before. "Are you going to keep doing this kind of work?" she asked.

"Should I?"

"How should I know?"

"You're right," I said. "I guess I thought you'd say I should become an English teacher."

"Is it better to be a teacher or a carpenter?" said Ida. "We need both."

"The people who are going to live here need more than carpentry," I said.

"I don't know," said Ida, patting the basin. "If I were a psychiatric patient, I know my problems wouldn't go away if I had a nicely installed toilet. But it wouldn't hurt!"

I explained how I'd set the toilet in place. "A rather mundane piece of life," she said, "but I never knew before how it was done."

"May I kiss you?" I said.

She nodded slowly, looking surprised but not surprised. My lips had barely touched hers—I had just got the first hint of the feel of her mouth, which is dry and soft—when the doorbell rang, a double chime that seemed to announce the arrival of a whole tea party.

We jumped apart. "I should warn people about kissing me," said Ida. "This invariably happens." She resigned herself. "Nothing is simple," she said as she started down the stairs. We clumped noisily to the front hall.

"I hope we're not interrupting," said the woman on the porch, and we shook our heads stupidly. "I'm Pamela Shepherd—"

"And we're the flock," said the man behind her. He was a young man with dark hair and a quick, mocking look, and behind him was a short, thin, middle-aged woman. Pamela Shepherd was a social worker, and these were going to be residents of the house.

"We planned just to drive by and look at it," said Pamela, "but we saw the light."



I explained who I was, and in came Pamela and the flock. The man immediately asked when we'd be finished so they could move in. "I've been at the hospital for five years," he said. "Never should have been there in the first place. Long series of mix-ups. Lost medicine. Doctor died. He was going to spring me."

"I'd hate it if my doctor died," said Ida.

"Woodchucks all over the grounds," said the man. "White squirrels. I bet you never even saw a white squirrel."

The little woman looked up at him through thick glasses. She looked as if she were going to ask a question, but she didn't. Pamela began to ask about the renovations.

When they went into the kitchen, Ida and I stayed behind in the hall to kiss. It was easier this time—it was as if it were our tenth kiss, except that the feel and the taste of her were new. I'd thought about it many times, but I hadn't imagined the slight coolness of her skin or the way her hair would get in my mouth. We heard the flock coming toward us. They were about to leave, and then the doorbell rang again.

It was a woman carrying a bag of groceries. "I saw a light," she said. "I live on the block. I was making sure nobody broke in."

She looked all of us over. I couldn't tell whether she was a nice person who was curious or somebody out to make trouble. Our two future residents happened to be standing on either side of me, and I had a silly impulse to spread my arms wide as if to guard them. The silent lady in the thick glasses, who stood to my left, looked a little like this woman who had just come in. They both had gray coats with gold buttons. "Is everyone from the state hospital?" said the woman. I didn't know whether she was asking if we were all mental patients or whether everyone who was going to live in the house was from the state hospital.

"No," said Pamela. "A mixed group."

"My husband," said the woman. "He keeps talking about who's