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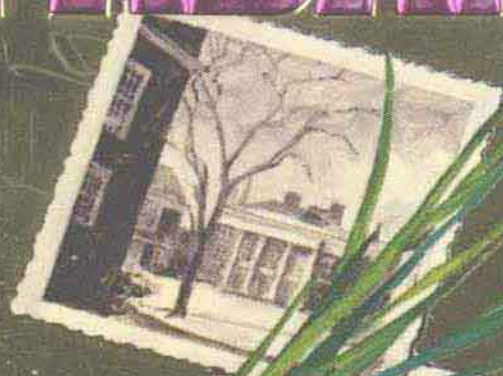
"ELEGANT AND RHYTHMIC."
The New York Times
Book Review

THE
NEW YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLER



SUPERIOR WOMEN

ALICE ADAMS



SUPERIOR WOMEN

ALICE ADAMS

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

To Robert McNie, with love

A Fawcett Crest Book
Published by Ballantine Books
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SUPERIOR PRAISE FOR SUPERIOR WOMEN

**"I think my work may have suffered.
I think I may even have lost a friend,
unplugging my phone that way. But I was
reading Alice Adams' SUPERIOR WOMEN and,
frankly, nothing else mattered"**

**Kimberly Blake
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS**

**"Some writers have such lovely voices,
they always make you want to hum along.
Alice Adams is like that; she is fond of the
word 'perfect,' and it suits her
SUPERIOR WOMEN is a kind of interior quest,
a portrait of the artist as
several different selves."**

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

**"The intricacies of remaining 'technical
virgins,' the degradations of dating drunken
and inept college boys, the rise and fall
of romantic passions, the subtle but intensely
felt shifts of closeness among the young women
are lovingly and expertly laid bare."**

**John Updike
THE NEW YORKER**

SUPERIOR WOMEN

**“Maybe you can’t
go back to college again — any more
than you can go home again —
but Adams put me right back to
my first day. . . .**

**She reminds us that
if many of us were dumb
about men and life in college, we
were also occasionally very smart.”**

**Nancy Evans
GLAMOUR**

**“The novel does very well in evoking
what it felt like to be a nubile young woman
in the 1940s. . . . Adams has a wonderful
way of capturing the multilayered reality of what
passes between people in a moment in time. . . .**

**the book has keen things to say
about women past and present, and
is pleasurable, intelligent reading.”**

**Barbara Koenig Quart
MS. MAGAZINE**

**“Again and again, Adams
proves herself able to ring in the surprise
while preserving the overall message that —
given the state of society — intelligence
for a woman is as much a curse
as it is a blessing.”**

**Mary Mackey
THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE**

SUPERIOR WOMEN

"When you think of a novel about a group of women who meet at college and what has happened to them since then, you think automatically of Mary McCarthy's *The Group*. Alice Adams' *SUPERIOR WOMEN* has far more compassion than McCarthy's novel had and it does entertain very well."

Barbara Bannon

THE CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER

"Adams' gift for characterization, her acute grasp of relationships, her gentle irony, and economical use of language have never been better displayed than in this novel. She conveys the nuances of class distinctions always clear and important to this generation, and the political events ... of the decades through which these women move, reminding us both explicitly and subtly of how Henry James and Proust depicted society, and making implicit comments on the America of her times."

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"Delightful reading. Adams' skill lies in skillful characterization, witty social observation, and a real sense of what it was like to be young, bright, and female back then."

Anne Morris

THE FORT WORTH STAR TELEGRAM

About the Author

Alice Adams was born in Virginia, educated at Radcliffe, and lives in San Francisco. She is the author of four novels, *Careless Love*, *Families and Survivors*, *Listening to Billie*, and *Rich Rewards*, and two collections of short stories, *Beautiful Girl* and *To See You Again*.



All, or almost all, of the events of Megan Greene's life, its violent dislocations, geographic and otherwise, are set in motion in the instant in which she first sees a young man named George Wharton, an unremarkable person, and later not a crucial figure in her life, but at that moment, to Megan, he is compellingly exotic. This takes place in the Stanford Bookstore, where Megan has a summer job; she lives in Palo Alto. George is tall and lean, with brown hair, sand-pale skin, a bony face, strong prominent jaw. He looks like what he is, a post-prep school boy from New England, but Megan has never seen one before. And his clean white khakis, old blue Oxford-cloth shirt, cord coat, and once-white sneakers, while fairly standard garb for Harvard Square and environs, in California look almost foreign.

Entranced, and aware among other more subtle reactions of a seering lust, Megan believes that she has "fallen in love." Since this is 1942 and she is sixteen, a not unreasonable interpretation.

Megan understands that he is "Eastern," this tall young man who has just come in and is standing there in the sunlight, tall and helpless, but she adds, as she is prone to, certain romantic corollaries of her own; she believes that he is rich (he is, very rich, but being a New Englander he would die before admitting to more than the most modest wealth). She furthermore assumes that he is "brilliant," possibly with literary inclinations, as hers are (she is wrong on both counts there; George is premed, of average intelligence). She imagines him to be endlessly sophisticated, having been everywhere—an older man, at least five years older than she, of wide experience. All sorts of experience, but especially sexual (wrong again).

Megan herself is medium-tall and plump, heavy-breasted,

with shapely legs. Brown hair and dark blue eyes, a pretty, smooth-skinned face, very serious. Her mouth is sweet and eager, her whole expression is eager, needful.

Aside from the obvious hungers that are the lot of every poor but very bright young woman, Megan is also avid for a quality that she has not seen much of and could not name; what she considers Eastern comes close. She covets style, the sophistication which she has instantly imputed to George Wharton, before hearing his voice or knowing his name—the very qualities which she deplores the lack of in her own surroundings, of course: her parents run a store on University Avenue, out near the Bayshore Highway, whose humiliating slogan is WE BUY JUNQUE, WE SELL ANTIQUES. And they do not do well at it, Florence and Harry, Mom and Pop. (George Wharton will never see them, Megan vows, almost in the first instant of her seeing him.)

He has noticed her too, Megan observes; what she does not know is that his awareness of her (yes, her breasts and legs) increases the strength of his so-New England vowels, the Yankee flatness of his speech, as he comes around the table where she is standing to ask, “Uh, I don’t suppose you have many books on sailing?”

Wordlessly, at first, but smiling, Megan, who knows the stock, is able to point in the right direction before she just gets out, “Over there.”

“Oh, really? Uh, great! Thanks!”

He smiles, and strides over to the shelves she indicated; he turns back to Megan to smile again, holding up a book to indicate that he has found just what he wanted, a book on sailing. Thanks to *her*.

With what Megan appreciates as true delicacy, he takes his book to another clerk for the actual purchase, but then, book in hand, he comes back to Megan, and stands looking down at her. He is five or six years older than she is.

“At least I can read about it,” he says, with a twisting, large-toothed grin; he must mean sailing?

“There’s supposed to be good sailing up in the San Francisco Bay,” Megan offers.

They are standing there in the dust-moted bookstore, a table of remaindered books between them, as though for safety. Megan in her flowered cotton dress that is too tight

and cut too low (her mother mentioned both at breakfast, mean skinny blond Florence). And George, in his strict blue-and-white cord coat.

He tells her, "This summer I really don't have any time. I'm cramming chemistry, for med school, and staying with some ancient cousins. In Atherton."

Aware of surges of heat throughout her body, Megan nevertheless achieves a pretty smile. She says, "Well—"

Very indifferently he asks her, "You live around here? You're in school?"

Of course by school he means Stanford, and so, vaguely, not quite lying, Megan says yes. And in that instant she has decided to apply for at least three Eastern schools, for the fall after next, when she will have finished high school. She will begin with Radcliffe—so lives are patterned.

The next day is exceptionally hot. In the tawny hills that surround the Stanford campus the dark green heavy live oaks barely move; along Palm Drive the asphalt is melting. High up in those palm trees the green-gray fronds are hard, dusty, and dry, they rattle in the slightest breeze, like snakes.

Stacking books, in the not-air-conditioned store, Megan dreams of sailing, breeze-driven across a blue Atlantic afternoon—dreams of sailing to an island off the east coast, to a white, white beach; they would leave the boat and lie there, alone on the sand, lie kissing, kissing until moonlight. She with him.

It is quite possible, though, that he will never come into the bookstore again, that she will never even find out his name. However, that afternoon, as she looks up from those dreams Megan sees him enter the store, a little stoop-shouldered, since he is so tall, too tall for that room. Her heart lurches as he smiles and comes up to her, saying, "Well, no one told me it got this hot in California. This feels like Boston."

"Usually, it doesn't, this is unusual—" It is hard for her to talk.

Not quite looking at her he says, "What I really need is a beer. But I guess I'll have to wait. Worse luck. I've got a lab, right this minute."

Megan smiles, barely breathing. She understands that he wants to ask her out for a beer, but she does not know why it is so hard for him to ask. He is not quite used to girls? Maybe he did not go to a public high school, where everyone did that every day. She asks him, "Have you been out to Rossi's? That's a beer place around here."

He takes this up eagerly, words hurrying out. "No, actually I've hardly been anywhere, between chem labs and my relatives in Atherton. The summer plan is that I have to have dinner with them every night. They're quite venerable, and I'm afraid my family has 'expectations.'" His mouth twists sideways. "But maybe after dinner, could you get out? I could pick you up at your dorm? I do have a car, in fact I drove out here in it." He grins, more breathless even than she is.

"Well, why don't we just meet here?" Megan suggests, on an instant's inspiration; the women's dorms are not far away, and if he thinks she lives in one, well, why not? She can take the same bus that she always takes to work, and when he takes her home—another plausible story comes to her instant rescue: she will say that she is spending the night with a girl friend who lives (unaccountable! so odd!) out near the Bayshore.

Thus from its earliest beginnings there is an illicit element in their relationship, to which Megan is instantly acquiescent, in which she, like so many women, functions with instinctive, adaptive skill.

He tells her his name, George Wharton, and she says hers, and then he says, in that voice, "Well, great, then. I'll see you out front here about nine, okay?"

"Oh, sure. *Great.*"

A Model A is not what Megan would have expected, not yet knowing anything about reverse snobbery, or prideful New England thrift, but that is what George leads Megan to, his car, which is parked in an alley near the bookstore. Not touching her, he opens the door for her, and Megan climbs awkwardly up into the seat.

They start off, and George begins to talk about his car. "It's a great old machine," he says. "Really the greatest.

Made it over the Rockies without a complaint. I hope I'll be in as good shape, at that age."

He laughs, as Megan does too. She has no idea, really, what he has been talking about, but she has begun to realize that he is not used to being with girls, not at all.

It is understood that they are heading for Rossi's, and at the edge of the campus he asks Megan where to go. She tells him: right, then left, then straight along a narrow white dirt road, between sweeping shadowed hills, dim black shapes of trees, under a huge black diamond-starred sky.

Discouragingly, the parking lot at Rossi's is very crowded, the Packards and Buicks and Ford convertibles of Stanford fraternity boys; some of them even belong to high school kids, but are borrowed from parents—the Buicks, probably. Megan is thinking that she would just as soon not see anyone she knows, especially not some friend from high school, who might speak to her, say something to do with school, which is Palo Alto High.

George too looks a little daunted by that crowd; Megan sees that he would much rather not spend any time there. She tells him, "They have beer to take out, if you want. It does look crowded."

"Oh great, terrific. I'll just go in and get it." He has opened the door on his side. Stepping down, and out, he then turns back to her. "You won't mind waiting?"

"Oh no, that'd be swell."

Hearing her own voice, which has hitherto sounded neutral to her ears, possibly slightly Midwestern, since both Florence and Harry come from Iowa, Megan now keenly feels the difference between her voice and his, hers and George's; it is almost as though she were hearing another language.

In five minutes, which have seemed very long to Megan, George is back with two large foaming paper cups. "We can always come back for more," he tells her. His narrow mouth smiles—not his eyes, which are regarding her curiously, intensely. He asks, "Do we drink them here?"

"We could, if you want to. Or we could drive somewhere." Megan has said this as softly as she can, as though to conceal both her accent, so suddenly disliked, and her certain knowledge of their true direction. They will go, she knows, to a

certain cleared space, high up and very private, in those surrounding hills. And she knows what they will be doing, in ten or so minutes from now. Their not touching, so far, has acquired a sort of violence; they are like dogs on leashes, she suddenly, crazily thinks, and she smiles to herself, in the dark.

She directs him up Page Mill Road, jolting over gravel. He is driving very fast, so that they both spill a little beer, as they sip, or try to.

At last Megan says *Here*, and George stops the car. Clutch, brakes—very noisy.

They are in a fragrant, rustling eucalyptus grove, near a heavy thick clump of pines. Far below them, through the trees, a vast valley of lights is just visible. Above them an airplane lumbers through the hot dark sky, flashing landing lights—they are near the airport.

Megan has put her cup down on the floorboards.

George asks, "All through?" His voice catches.

Mid-seat they collide, then, their mouths, arms, breasts, and hands and legs all wildly seeking each other out. (The genital sources of all this passion are oddly ignored, not touched, only mashed together violently, through clothes.) "Kissing" is what both Megan and George Wharton think of themselves as doing, or "necking," that being the totally unspecific term then in use. They are kissing, their mouths devouringly open to each other, his tongue in her mouth, probing and tasting as she tastes his, his sexual tastes of cigarettes and beer, hers of summer fruits and toothpaste and beer.

Although they reach many climaxes, both of them, in the course of those hours of kissing and straining together, that first night—and God know how many climaxes in the course of the weeks that they spend in that way, every night—those spasms are in a curious way passed over, made nothing of. George is ashamed: surely he is not supposed to be doing this with a girl, it is probably worse than doing it with your hand, in the shower. And Megan is similarly ignorant; the orgasm is the one part of the sexual act that no one has told her about, in terms of women; she has been vaguely told that "receiving seeds" is pleasurable, but in some unspecified way. Men "ejaculate," women "receive." Thus she is allowed

to believe that she and George are kissing, are necking—neither of which is necessarily related to “sexual intercourse.”

It is only a six-week chemistry course that George is taking, and then he is going back to Boston; he will spend the rest of the summer with his parents and brothers at their place on Cape Cod, “the Cape.” Sailing, swimming, “clamming.” Resting up for med school. To Megan it all sounds remote and glamorous, a movie about people in white flannel suits and yachting hats. Mostly it sounds most painfully distant from her, from California. She is sure that George will not write to her; in a way she does not even expect him to. But the pit of her stomach twists at the thought, the imminence of his departure.

It does not occur to her, as it might to some other girl (surely it would occur to Lavinia, later one of Megan’s most important friends), that he could invite her to visit, to meet his family. Learn to sail. To “clam.”

“I’m not much on writing letters,” George quite unnecessarily says, on their last night together. Again, they are parked up on Page Mill Road.

Megan has determined not to cry, a resolve of steel, and she is not going to say anything silly, any high school stuff about love.

And she manages; she even jokes, “Maybe postcards?”

George laughs, very pleased with her: had he been afraid that she would cry, or make some dumb demand? He says, “Terrific, I’ll send you a postcard.” And then, out of many impulses, innate good manners among them probably, he says, “Megan, you don’t know what a difference knowing you has made, this summer. You are absolutely the greatest girl—” He breaks off, having gone as far as he can, and maybe farther.

They fall to kissing again. His large hands, now experienced, reach up under her bra, touch her breasts, hard nipples. He does not touch her under her pants.

Clutching each other, they writhe and twist and strain

together, thighs and legs entwined, sweat and sexual secretions wetting them everywhere.

They are kissing, they are necking in a car. They are not "going all the way."

You are absolutely the greatest girl. Those words, in George's often-hoarse, flat-voweled, and still (to Megan) exotic voice, form her winter treasure, a record that she plays and replays. It is an accompaniment to her memories of "kissing."

But, greatest in what way, did he mean? Sexiest, she is fairly sure that he must have meant that; she thinks he has not kissed many other girls. But is that good, is it good to be sexy? Or is there something seriously wrong with her, called nymphomania?

Or, did he possibly also mean nice, or smart, or even pretty? There was, certainly, a note of regret in his words, but regret for what? For the end of their summer time together, or for not being able to say more?

Did he love her?

Rounding any corner in Palo Alto, Megan imagines seeing George, with his narrow sea-blue eyes, his tall strong body, just slightly stooped. His shy New England grin. There he would be, and he would say something really silly, like *Surprise*. And then he would say, even sillier, "I had to see you, I couldn't stand another day or night without you. I love you."

No postcards, nothing at all until December, and then there is one, mailed in care of the Stanford Bookstore, that is signed, "Your old friend, George Wharton." No salutation, just beginning: "Remember me? Med school is really keeping my nose in the books. I hope you are well. I wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Your old friend, George Wharton."

The picture on the other side is of a dormitory, where he must live. Longwood Avenue, in Boston.

Not much to go on. Still, there is the fact of his having sent a card at all. Not having forgotten who she is.

Megan thinks about George all the time: while studying

and getting straight A's, while walking and swimming a lot and trying not to eat; while parked and necking up in their place on Page Mill Road with some boy from her high school (in that slightly odd way, she is being true to George).

"Rad-cliffe?" says Florence Greene, mother of Megan; giving the two syllables equal stress, she has made the word bizarre. Thin, bleached-blond Florence does not look old enough to be Megan's mother.

Megan moves restlessly through the dingy, antimacassared living room of the small house that George Wharton never entered—but where, in the early morning hours, he often let her off: her girl friend was recovering from "an operation," Megan was staying on with her, "helping out."

"You noticed that new drive-in, a couple of blocks from here, out on the Bayshore?" now asks Florence.

"Uh, sort of." She and George once had hamburgers there; Megan recalls how they gobbled, so famished, after so much kissing.

"They're hiring," says Florence. "I'm really thinking I could get me a job there. They've got real cute uniforms." Megan believes that her mother talks this way on purpose to irritate and embarrass her; after all, back in Iowa Florence taught school, before the Depression took her job and she and Harry came to California and started in with Junque. When Megan was younger, for a long time she refused to believe that Florence was her mother.

"Oh *Mother*," Megan now says—a frequent response to Florence. She has instantly imagined her mother coming up to their car, as a carhop. Coming up to George's Model A and—oh Jesus, what could she say? "Jesus, Mother."

At which Florence flares up. "Don't swear at me! You know you're just like your father, when it comes to me. Why shouldn't I get a job like that? You're both big snobs, that's what you are. Look, you want to go to Rad-cliffe, you go there, if you can get yourself a scholarship, to add to that money your granddaddy left for your college. And I want to be a carhop. I'm tired of that dirty store. Tired of being broke all the time. I want to *work*. And I want to wear something *cute*."

* * *

One of the things that Megan spends the second half of the winter doing is trying to answer George's postcard. Not that it needed an answer, she knew that, but she wanted to remind him of herself, and she wanted to sound light and lovable, not a fat girl who is seriously in love. She scribbles message after message on various scratch pads, and then on a variety of unsent Christmas cards. It always comes out wrong, whatever she says.

At last she writes what is a probably unconscious imitation of the very card that she got from him. Including no salutation. "Guess what: Radcliffe has decided to accept me and I start in June. Will live in Bertram Hall. Hope to see you sometime. Your friend, Megan Greene."

On the reverse side there is a picture of the Stanford Bookstore.