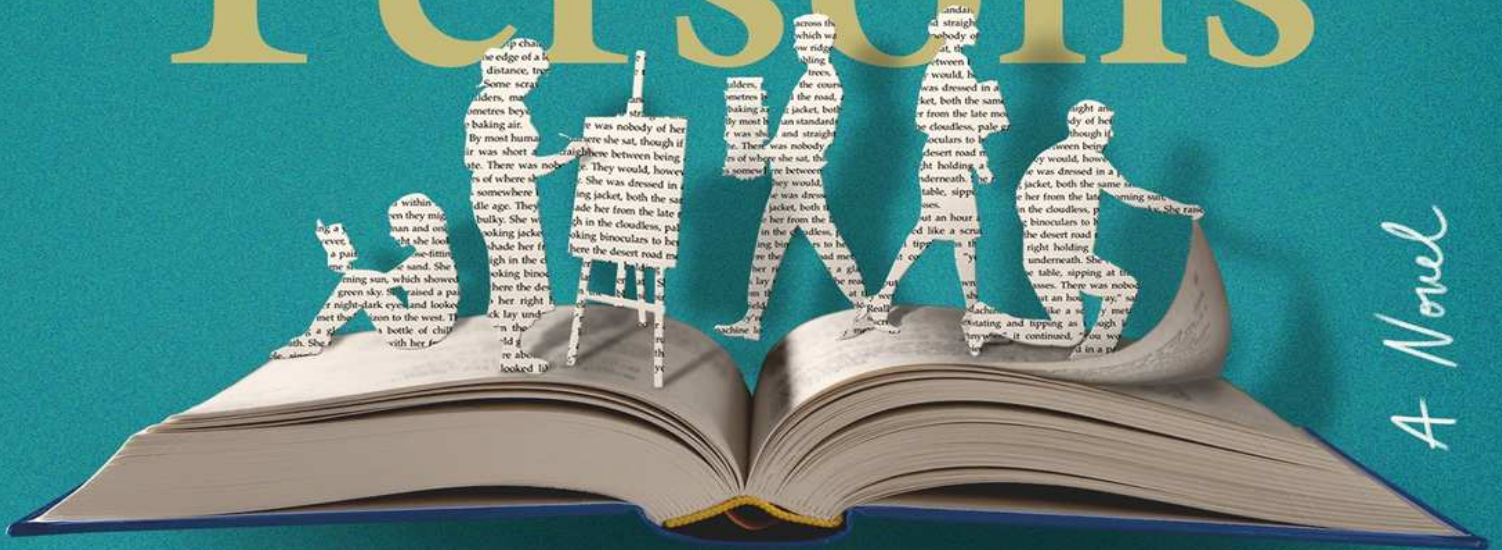


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No Two Persons



A Novel


Erica
Bauermeister

New York Times bestselling
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No Two Persons

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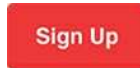
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For Holly

No two persons ever read the same book, or saw the same picture.

The Writings of Madame Swetchine, 1860

I

Maine
2010

The Writer

The story on Alice's computer screen had been finding its way into words for more than five years, or maybe forever. Over that time, it had grown, changed, creaked, flown, gone silent, and then gained its voice again, its plot taking unexpected paths, its characters turning into people she hadn't thought they would be, just as she had. This glowing screen, the one constant. This story, in all its iterations. Now awaiting the last step. Someone to say *yes*.

She was young for a writer, barely twenty-five, but in some ways Alice had always been old. Always been watching, learning, searching for the things that people were not saying. Truth lies below the table; she knew this even as a child. If given the choice, she would have taken her dinner plate down into the cool, dark space beneath the tablecloth, where she could watch her mother's fingers tighten along with the conversation. Watch her older brother's shoes point toward the exit even as their father interrogated him about his latest swim meet. Medals he did or didn't get, effort he did or didn't expend.

Children, of course, did not eat under the table, so for Alice, a tendency toward napkin-dropping had to suffice.

Why can't she keep that thing on her lap? her father would say to her mother.



But you could learn so much more, keeping your gaze down. Just as well for Alice, who had never liked meeting people's eyes. It always felt like looking into a jam-packed closet—or opening the door to your own.

In any case, her father preferred children who were respectful.

When Alice had learned how to read, she'd discovered her own world, far from their house and their eastern Oregon town. Her brother called it

hiding, but as he'd read the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy three times by that point, he was hardly one to talk. After Alice brought her choices home from the library, she'd open their covers, smelling other children's meals and lives in the pages, and she would put her face in and blow, like a human smudging to make the stories hers.

Her brother caught her at it one day. Peter was eight years older than Alice, and ever so much taller. He was like a great and gentle horse in her life. When she confessed what she was doing, he just smiled.

"Ah, Alice," he said, switching into his Bilbo voice. "Just a plain hobbit you look. But there's more about you than appears on the surface."

* * *

The year Alice turned nine, an author came to visit her school. It was on that day Alice understood for the first time—in a way that was both slightly depressing and terribly exciting—that books were written by people. Real people, with mascara that flecked down onto the soft pale curves of skin under the eyes, and a sweater that was a bit too long in the sleeves. This woman at the front of the class, this not-quite-finished-looking woman, had written the book she was holding in her hand. Before this point, Alice had never met an actual author, and so it had been possible to pretend that they were no more real, and thus as magical, as the characters inside. But here was this woman, telling the class that she wrote every day, during these hours, using this ordinary pen. That the characters were her friends.

"I live in their world when I am writing," the author said to the class.

Yes, Alice thought, the breath catching in her throat. And in that moment, she changed her allegiance from magic to magician.

* * *

"I'm going to make my own worlds," Alice told her brother.

Peter was getting his things together for a swim meet. He was always swimming—or running or lifting weights in preparation, his weekends spent traveling to swim meets with their father. Their father said children needed to have goals, by which he meant, win. By which he meant, Peter. Alice wondered what their father would say about her new goal, but it was not something she would tell him. She had learned that being a girl was a little like going under the table, out of the line of sight. And that could be

beneficial.

Peter was the one she told things to. He would make a secret picnic—peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, with double jelly the way she liked, and potato chips he'd bought on the sly from the corner grocery store—and they would sit in the leafy refuge of the tree house he'd made in the woods, and he would listen to whatever she wanted to say.

Now, in his bedroom, he glanced over at her and smiled, just a bit, and she looked for a moment into his eyes.

Too much in there, Alice thought.

“Peter,” their father yelled from downstairs, and Peter startled.

He looked at Alice and shook his head. “You get the world they give you, Alice,” he said, reaching for his backpack. “I’m sorry.”

But he was wrong, Alice told herself. He had to be. Books, by their very existence, proved that.

★ ★ ★

The year Alice turned ten, Peter went to college on a swimming scholarship, leaving her alone. It had been clear for a while that Alice was not a social creature, never inclined toward sleepovers or witty notes passed in class, caring little for Girl Scouts or clubs. She'd always been that kid—you know the one—reading by herself during lunch or on the bus. A small animal, not weak enough to attract attention, just alone.

It was perhaps not surprising then, that while she was disappointingly average when it came to math and geography, she was always at the top of her English classes.

“She could be a teacher someday,” her teachers said, year after year.

Why don't they ever say writer? she wrote to Peter.

Because you're the one with the imagination, he said. *That's your door out, Allie girl. Use it.*

★ ★ ★

So Alice decided to train herself. If writers were magicians, she figured, then there were tricks you could learn. She was old enough by that point to know that magic in the real world was just a series of illusions, carefully crafted to distract you from what was really going on. A wall of medals. A fresh pie every Sunday. A father home for dinner every night. *Look there, not here.*

People didn't see reality because they didn't want to, not because it wasn't there. It stood to reason that writing was no different. Look carefully and all the tricks would become clear.

★ ★ ★

After that, while some girls spent their allowances on clothes or lip gloss, Alice bought books.

What's wrong with the library? her father demanded. But Alice needed the books to be hers, so she could write in them. Notes in the margins. Arrows drawn from one page to the next. Marking the clues that tipped you off to what was coming, the one detail that told you all you needed to know about a character.

When she had to go out in the real world, she watched for what people didn't know they were telling you. She noted a hand playing with a necklace. An eyebrow, as an interrogative or a dismissal. The way little kids' shoulders would turtle up near their ears when a bully was near. She listened, as well. To the pauses. The falters. The emotional floods of surprise or warmth or anger. She collected the stories she witnessed and wrote them in notebooks that she kept under her mattress. Once in a while, she would send one to Peter.

Maybe you can make worlds after all, he wrote back.

★ ★ ★

Alice was fourteen when Peter quit college, four months before his graduation, taking off for parts unknown.

You see? their father said to their mother, *this is what happens when you insist upon naming your child after a boy who wouldn't grow up.*

For a few years, he sent her postcards. A rocky coastline in Maine. A market in Egypt. Mono Lake, its limestone formations rising out of the blue water like castles. *Allie girl, you would love this.* Alice would hold the postcard close to her face, inhaling to see if she could smell her brother on the paper. Sometimes she thought she could. But as time went on, the cards became fewer, the words on them more and more vague until they seemed to disappear even as she read them.

And then there was nothing at all.

★ ★ ★

Alice's father said he had wasted enough money educating his children, but the eloquence of Alice's application essay helped get her a scholarship at a small, tree-lined college in Maine, a whole continent away from their eastern Oregon town. That first semester, Alice signed up for two classes in science and one in economics. The last item on her schedule was a creative writing course—small and innocuous as a white rabbit, a minor prop on a well-appointed stage.

Core requirement, she said to her parents, when they asked.

Now things will start to happen, she thought.

★ ★ ★

Alice took a seat in the third row, on the right side near the door. Closer to the front than she would usually choose, but she was excited. The creative writing professor was already there, standing behind the podium, making conversation with a few students. An older man, tall, but with a kindliness that surprised her. She'd been expecting something more along the lines of Jack Kerouac or James Joyce, all tortured soul and swagger. But Dr. Roberts was neither of these things—although he did seem absent-minded, one side of his button-down shirt collar still stuck underneath the neck of his sweater. Alice wondered how long it would be before he noticed.

"I know," he said, as he started up the class, "you're all dying to be published. But it can take a long time, and sometimes it doesn't happen at all. That's not the point, though. The point is what you'll learn on the way."

Alice could almost hear her father: *That's what people who failed say.*

"Let's start with the basics," Professor Roberts said. "If you think about it, every story—even the most fantastical—is grounded in things we already know, and every book is about questions that have already been asked."

Alice leaned forward, waiting for more explanation. She'd waited years to be here, with someone who could open the doors she needed opened.

"Bilbo may be a hobbit," the professor continued, "but we were all small at some point. And if you want to be a writer, chances are you've also experienced what it's like to be an underdog."

"What about serial killers?" interjected a young man in the second row. Alice looked over, observing the sprawl of his body in the chair. *No underdog there*, she thought. She could already see his future. Fifty books

with his name emblazoned across the front in sans serif type. Probably in red.

“Well,” Professor Roberts said, “of course serial killers do exist, although in far fewer numbers than your average airport bookstore might have you believe. But more relevant to this discussion”—and here, for a moment, Alice thought that Professor Roberts might be more formidable than his appearance suggested—“the serial killer genre asks one of the most common questions of all: What are we humans willing to do to each other? Or for each other? It’s actually the same question you’ll find in *The Iliad* or *Pride and Prejudice*. Or, perhaps, any night around a family dinner table.”

Alice looked up.

“The trick for a writer,” the professor continued, “is to take those eternal questions, those known bits and pieces, and put them together in a way that helps us see our world in a different light. That’s where you come in.”

He looked out at the class and smiled. “Easy, right?” he said. “So, let’s start at the beginning. Write me a story.”

Alice had been waiting her whole life for someone to say that.

Back in her dorm room, she took out a pen and a pad of paper, and let the words race out of her. She worked all weekend, ignoring economics, science. The night before the story was due, she stayed at her desk until dawn, typing up the handwritten pages and checking for misspellings, grammar mistakes. She wanted it perfect. She turned it in with a feeling of complete and utter satisfaction and waited to see the response.

★ ★ ★

It was a simple one, written across the top of her first page: *Let’s talk. My office hours are Tuesdays, 12–2.*

★ ★ ★

Professor Roberts’s office was just as it should be, bookshelves from floor to ceiling, a desk of dark wood, covered with neat stacks of papers. He motioned to the chair across from him.

She put down her backpack, and sat looking at him, expectant.

“Alice,” he said, “you’ve got incredible talent. I’ve never had a student with such a command of details.”

This is where it happens, Alice thought. This is where it starts.

“Thank you,” she said. Then she saw it, the way his fingertips reached for his pen, brought it closer. “But?” she said.

He smiled. “You see? Details. That’s what makes you good.”

She waited. *It’s going to be okay. Whatever it is, you can learn it.*

“Alice,” he said, “the world you’ve created on these pages is extraordinary—but reading this feels like watching a beautiful movie from the back row. I suspect that’s because you’re doing that, too.” He paused, then continued, “If you’re going to write the book you’re meant to write, you’ll have to let it in. You’ll have to let us in.”

“I don’t know...” she said, but inside her, the sentence was shorter, instinctive. *No.*

“I understand,” he said, nodding. “And I’ll teach you everything else I can, but that one’s on you.”

★ ★ ★

Alice knew there were some boxes whose lids were meant to stay closed. She would do anything else, though. Learn anything else. Over the next three years, she took every course Professor Roberts taught.

“I want you to go to a coffee shop,” he said in one class. “Close your eyes and listen. Write down what the people around you are feeling. Not saying. Not thinking. Feeling. Ask yourself: How do you know that? Is it a dip in a sentence? A scrape of a chair? The snap of a plastic lid onto a cup? Use the details to take us inside.”

“I see what you’re doing,” Alice said later in his office.

“Is it working?” he asked.

She shrugged.

“Do you want it to?” he asked.

★ ★ ★

And then, Peter came home.

★ ★ ★

Not home as in their parents’ house, but home to their eastern Oregon town. He’d gotten a job as a cook in a restaurant, and an apartment—a small basement place on the other side of town—before they even knew he was there. It was August; Alice was home for summer break and one day

he just walked into the kitchen.

It had been seven years. He was thinner now, a lot. Their mother fluttered, trying to feed him. His hair was longer, and Alice thought it suited him, even though their father would hate it. But none of that mattered, because he didn't stay for dinner, slipped out before Alice could get him alone, ask any of the questions that had filled her mind.

Where have you been? Why would you come back?

★ ★ ★

She saw him three more times before she went back to college, always in that basement apartment. He cooked her dinner on a small two-burner stove. A curry. A pozole. A pasta Bolognese. They ate sitting on the floor. Between bites, he told her about climbing a flight of five hundred steps to a temple. About a train ride across Russia, the rumble of the wheels on the tracks. Of hitchhiking across France, the car accident, the family who took him in for a week while he healed. Got better.

“They laughed together, Alice,” he said. “At the dinner table. Can you imagine?”

Being there was like their picnics in his tree house, only not. There was something about Peter now—not new, but more so. Once, while he was cooking, she closed her eyes and listened. Heard the vibration in him. Too fast, even though when she opened her eyes, there he was, standing like the calmest thing on the planet.

She would have stayed with him if she could. She tried once, saying she'd sleep on the lumpy sofa. But the apartment was small, and she could feel how much he wanted to be alone in it. How these evenings were his gifts for her, dearly bought.

The last time she saw him before she went back to college, it seemed as if something had loosened, unraveled, but she thought that might have to do with the bottle of wine he'd brought home from the restaurant, almost completely consumed.

“Sometimes I wonder,” he said, his back to her as he did the dishes, “what it would have been like, just to be in the water by myself. Nobody else in my head.”

“Peter,” she said, standing up, moving toward him, “I'm sorry. I should have...”

“What?” he said, not turning around. “What could you have done?”

I could have loved you so much that nothing else would matter. I could have made you a world, hidden you under the table. I could have run away with you.

“It’s okay, Alice,” he said. “I’ll be okay.”

Because he was her big brother, and because she wanted to, she believed him.

★ ★ ★

Alice got the news three days after she returned to college that fall. She listened, silent, to her mother’s voice on the phone.

“Peter died of an overdose. They found him in the bathtub.”

“He chose a way that wouldn’t make a mess,” her mother added. “He was always a neat child.”

“Was there water in the tub?” Alice asked.

“No,” her mother said. “What an odd question.”

But Alice knew it was the only one worth asking. She hung up the phone, went into her closet, and closed the door.

★ ★ ★

She flew home for the funeral. In the church, she stood pinned between her mother and father as the pastor spoke. Her father’s back was straight; her mother curled over like a pill bug. Alice closed her eyes, breathed in the smell of anguish and guilt, one on each side of her. Neither from the person she expected.

Too late, she thought, and took the night flight back.

★ ★ ★

She stopped going to her classes, even the one with Professor Roberts. She couldn’t write—how could you with only one word at your disposal? It banged in her thoughts like a ball against a wall. *Why. Why. Why.* It was there when she dreamed, when she woke up, when she stood in the shower or tried to read her textbooks. She gave up on classes and walked all day, across and off campus, through the town, as the weather started to change and the leaves got ready to turn and fall.

She knew there was a pool in town; she’d seen it, but never gone inside. Now, at the end of each day, she found herself standing in front of the door.

Finally, she bought a bathing suit, and walked in.

★ ★ ★

It wasn't like the Olympic-sized aquatic centers Peter had competed in, with their blasts of chlorine and shining lights. This one felt more like the multipurpose room in an old elementary school. There was a group of older women in a water aerobics class, a few swimmers in the lanes. But the air was warm and the ceilings tall, the sounds of voices and splashing bouncing off the walls and up into the air. Alice found an empty lane and sat at the end, her feet in the water, stretching the cap over her head as she had seen her brother do so many times. She knew the resemblance would end there; she had always been a half-hearted breaststroker, frog-kicking her way across the pool in spasmodic little bursts.

You're lucky, Allie girl, Peter used to say. Your talent is quiet. And Alice always thought that was just one of those things people said, like you've got a good personality when what they meant was you'll never get a guy.

But she was rethinking that now. Sitting at the edge of the pool, she positioned the goggles over her eyes, and the world narrowed, a strange and blinkered vision. She ducked underwater, and all the sounds turned into a booming silence. It was just her and the water and the blue line down the center of the lane, stretching out to an end she knew would be there.

She pushed off, reaching her arms out, then drawing them back. The *why* was not gone—she could hear it with each stroke—but by the fifth lap, the word started to change, its hard surface beginning to dissolve in the water, until it was the rhythm of her arms and legs and nothing more.

She could only manage about ten laps that day, but it exhausted her in a way that felt good. She found, however, that as soon as she was out of the water, the *why* came back, as strong as ever. And so, she returned to the pool, every day, adding laps to her count until she was up to twenty, then thirty, then fifty. As her breaststroke became more assured, her rhythm smoothed out, arms and legs propelling her forward. She didn't even realize for a while that the word in her head had become two.

You know. You know. You know.

★ ★ ★

Professor Roberts was standing outside the pool one afternoon when she exited.

“I heard you were here,” he said. “My wife’s in the aerobics class. She was talking about a young woman who couldn’t stop swimming. Described you to a T.”

Alice nodded.

“It’s been a month. Are you coming back to class? Are you writing, at least?”

“I can’t,” she said.

He looked at her for a long moment. “It doesn’t have to happen in my class,” he said, “but it’s time. Write the thing you’re meant to write, Alice.”

★ ★ ★

It happened on the second half of her twenty-fifth lap on her thirty-third day of swimming. She had just pushed off the concrete wall, still underwater, her arms pulling back on the first stroke, when an image came into her mind. A young boy, sitting in a field. Tall grass, huge sky, the boy at the center, but shifting, changing, getting ready for something.

She thought at first it might be Peter, but this boy was blond, while her brother had been all dark hair and eyes. And unlike Peter, this boy was scared of water; she could feel it.

Still, there was something about the boy that felt familiar. Necessary. She took another stroke, wanting to get closer to him, knowing that couldn’t happen physically, but drawn forward anyway. At the same time not wanting to rush, and lose the image. Because he was the door; she knew it. The beginning of a book.

Don’t be scared, she said. But whether it was to him or herself, she didn’t know.

She swam, but slower now.

It’s okay, she said. *I’ll take care of you.*

★ ★ ★

At first, he only came to her in the pool—*Strange*, she thought, *for a boy who hates water*. But who was she to question? All she knew was that she wanted to be with him, discover his story.

It wasn’t love. Well, it was, but not the way that love was described in

books. More like encountering a path, winding off into the woods. How can you not want to see where it goes? How can you not love its twists and curves?

She started going to the pool earlier and earlier, arriving as it opened, swimming as long as her body would let her. She found if she let her thoughts wander, meld into the rhythm of the strokes, the boy might give her something new—the image of a garden. A boat. The clink of glass against a tabletop. A mother, looking back over her shoulder at her son. Each image a seed, seeking soil. *I'm here*, she said, and opened her mind to them.

* * *

One day she was standing in the shower in the locker room, the hot water running over her, her muscles still twitching from exertion, when she heard the door to the pool open and then a bustle of noise—women laughing. The aerobics class. Alice usually timed her exit from the pool so she could have the locker room to herself, but she'd been so deep in her head that she'd lost track of time. Now she stalled. After a few moments, she realized they might need her shower, so she came out, and encountered a forest of old women, all naked. One of them looked over. A tall woman, her arms and legs lean, her stomach just slightly paunchy.

“It’s our little mascot,” she said to the others. And then, to Alice, “You’ve been getting better.”

The women turned, smiling. Alice nodded, slightly confused, and tried not to look at them too much—what else did you do in a room full of old naked bodies? But the women seemed not to care. Greetings over, they continued on, breasts swaying like pendulums as they walked to the shower, stomachs rolling into soft mounds as they leaned over to dry a foot, a crotch. Everywhere she looked were the gnarled roots of varicose veins, the shining ropes of scars—across abdomens, chests, along the sides of knees.

Alice had never seen her mother without clothes, or even in a swimsuit, for that matter. Her experience with naked bodies had been confined to high school locker rooms, where the breasts were fresh as new apples, buns tight with exercise. Too much perfection. She’d always tried to change in the stalls, wait until the other girls were done to come out.

But this was not that. This was all that fruit gone overripe, going back

to the ground it came from. She suspected those perfect high school girls would be horrified. And yet, there was something so gracelessly graceful about it all.

“See you tomorrow, Flipper,” said the tall woman as she hooked the strap of her bag over her shoulder.

★ ★ ★

When Alice got back to her room that day there was a message from the dean of students, requesting her presence. She went to his office. He told her what she expected to hear: at this point, there was no chance she could pass her classes. He needed an explanation, a reason to help, to save her scholarship for the next year.

“I heard you’ve had a loss,” he said. “How can we assist you?”

“You can’t,” she said. “But thank you.” Her mother had taught her to be polite.

She went into town, found a job washing dishes in a restaurant. The last guy had just quit, saying he needed to study harder for finals.

“Four to eleven P.M.,” the owner said. “Can you do it?”

“Yes,” she said.

She had her dorm room for another couple weeks. The dean said he was giving her every chance to turn things around, which was nice of him, she supposed, especially after he’d said it wasn’t possible. When school was over, she’d find a place to live off-campus. She didn’t need much—a chair, a bed. An electrical outlet.

★ ★ ★

Her parents called.

“What are you doing?” her father said. “We got the notice from the college. This is just like your brother.”

“No,” Alice said. “It’s not.”

“Are you coming home?” It wasn’t a question; her father didn’t ask questions. But Alice answered it anyway.

“No,” she said.

★ ★ ★

When there was only one week left in the semester, Alice went by the local bulletin boards on her way to the pool. She checked the notices—