

## **Alabama for Beginners**

by **Jean Ryan**

Receptionists, store clerks, civil servants—many people here call me Miss Jean. Surnames are largely ignored, as if they are only a nuisance, something that gets in the way. They also use “Ma’am” and “Sir” for punctuation, a habit I’ve already picked up, courtesy being contagious.

The women, old and young, employ all sorts of endearments: Hon, Baby, Sugar, Darlin. The first time I ordered a sandwich at the local Subway, the girl behind the counter buckled my knees with kindness. The fact that she was brutally overweight and not blessed with movie star beauty made her benevolence all the more touching. Courtesy seems reflexive here, a trait bequeathed at birth.

Four months ago, my wife and I moved from Napa Valley to coastal Alabama (we are originally from states in the east and traveled west for more breathing room). Many of our friends worried about how we would fare in a red state, particularly as a couple. I was apprehensive too, having lived forty years in the San Francisco bay area, haven to the LGBT community and epicenter of progressive politics. Hurricanes, humidity—these we knew we could weather. But censure, malice? How could we defend against being unwelcome?

Well, it appears that a pair of gray-haired lesbians is not sufficient cause for alarm, at least not in this neighborhood, a new development poised between rural and suburban. Folks greet us as we greet them, with smiles and handshakes. There could of course be more to it. Maybe my wife has gained standing by way of her new John Deere mower, the Ford Ranger she drives, or the shop she is having built. Maybe they like my

plantings, the shutters we put up, the well we had dug. Our neighbors seem to respect these things, practicality being the benchmark of worth in the deep South.

You don't see many Jaguars or BMWs here. You see a lot of trucks, tractors and ATVs. The men driving these vehicles know how to fix them; they know how to fix and build all sorts of things. This is such a DIY kind of place that it can be difficult to locate a handyman for hire (forget about Yelp or Angie's List—folks here express themselves in person).

If you do find someone to hire, understand that the job might take a while. Workers move with deliberation, keeping pace with the temperature, lounging cross-legged through the frequent squalls. When weather is not a factor, scheduling often is, the union of subcontractors, equipment and supplies hinging on equal parts planning and luck. Being okay with delays, with weather, with whatever does or doesn't occur, is a southern artform. Urgency can get no purchase in this soggy, sultry expanse.

This easy-going approach is also evidenced in Alabama's municipal buildings, where matters are considered on a case by case basis, and homeowners are not harassed by punitive deadbolt rubrics. Clerks are merciful and will often bend the rules to accommodate citizens in a bind. If you're a California transplant, and especially one who owned a small business, this clemency when you first encounter it, will undo you.

Bending rules, looking the other way—these tactics are not always useful, particularly in relation to larger issues. Habituated to a part of the country where eco-concerns dominate the culture, I am stunned by the shrugging disregard encountered here: the mindless distribution of plastic bags, the absence of curbside recycling, the store shelves bulging with herbicides and pesticides. Construction sites are littered with cigarette butts, beverage bottles and fast food cartons that blow far and wide in the wind. This trash accumulates as the building progresses and not until the sod is about to be installed is the property cleared, typically by a single laborer with a tractor. I think

of the casual defilement, the builders dropping rubbish as if it is their right, and dismay engulfs me.

Reconciling the south's contradictions—lassitude on the one side, benevolence on the other—is a pointless pursuit and I am learning to dwell on the advantages instead. Most everything, for instance, is cheaper in Alabama—utilities, products, services. Gas is at least a dollar a gallon less than what I'm used to paying and homes prices, compared to Napa, are ridiculously low. I don't know if this is because sellers don't realize they can charge more or if they actually care more about people than profits. There *is* an expectation of fair dealing in the south, a collective innocence that keeps surprising me.

There are plenty of businesses I drive right past, things that don't pertain to me, like churches, gun stores, pawn shops. There is no shortage of enterprise and no shame if these ventures fail. People just toss the dice again and hope for a win; maybe a roller-skating rink next time, a snow cone shop. You see a lot of emergency clinics (all the DIYers?) and commodious hospitals, but I have yet to spot a plastic surgery center—I guess the demand is low. Perhaps people are easier on each other here; or maybe beauty, having little use, doesn't have much currency.

Coming from a state where properties crowd each other, where the landscape is chronically imperiled by drought and fire, I am grateful for the abundance of coastal Alabama: the spacious yards, the endless lawns, the tangled woods, the unabating flow of creeks and bayous. Land and water for miles and miles, all you could ever want. Animals too. Creatures nearly mythic in my Vermont memories are popping up everywhere now: cardinals, blue butterflies, yellow-bellied turtles, tree frogs—fireflies! Those floating beacons of my youth. All is not lost, they assure me, each time I see them blinking in the woods.

While this area's human population appears at ease, the flora and fauna are never at rest. Have you ever tried pulling a young saw palmetto out of a lawn? Don't bother. All you can do is snip the savage thing at ground level and acknowledge its imminent

return. It has no choice. All it knows is life. Greenbrier is another opportunist in the lawn. While this plant can be yanked out more readily than palmetto, doing so is like playing whack-a-mole. In the time it takes you to prize the long white root from your turf, another upstart appears. I still have a red scar on my ankle from an attack by one of these thorny vines, before I understood that in order to survive in this jungle, one must move slowly and focus on the ground.

Reaching for the hose faucet a few weeks ago, I glimpsed a flash of movement not two feet from me. I gaped, amazed to see a snake so close, and not an innocent garden variety, but something coiled and menacing. I could tell from the triangular head that it was venomous, but not until my spouse came out with the trusty Audubon guide did I learn that it was a young cottonmouth whose bite causes intense pain, bleeding, swelling, nausea and potential amputation.

Yesterday a katydid landed on my back door. I peered through the glass at the leggy green bug, gradually becoming aware that it was missing the lower portion of its body; then I noticed it was also missing one of its hind legs. I don't imagine a katydid can live for long without these vital parts, and I realized the injuries were fresh, that somewhere in my big green yard there was a frog or toad or snake with half a meal in its mouth.

I am adjusting, wising up to the environment, making room for new hobbies and habits. Bringing my cans and bottles to a recycling center instead of the front curb is not that onerous, and the humidity is manageable now that I've squared off with it. Finding fresh lettuce is a challenge, but the veggie beds we're building should solve that problem. My sister and brother-in-law are close by, which was a big factor in our decision to move here, and their company is a long-awaited comfort. I would of course like to unearth the gay community—there must be one, some brave little enclave waiting for reinforcements. On deeper reflection, maybe there is no enclave here, no separate community at all. Maybe these pockets are going the way of gay bars, no longer needed in this age of sexual fluidity, borders and labels all slipping away—now there's a happy thought.

Which reminds me of a funny story. The day after we moved in, one of our neighbors came over with a welcoming smile and a basket of local jams. We exchanged pleasantries and then she asked if we had found our people. Wow, I thought, admiring her frankness; had we misjudged this place? “The Lillian fellowship is right down the road,” she continued, “but Mike and I go to the Presbyterian on 98.”

What I like most about the south is the simple, durable goodwill. I can feel it changing me, softening me. Each morning my wife and I have coffee on the back patio and watch the sun come up through the pines. As we often come out before dawn, I sweep a flashlight beam across the cement, making sure we don't step on something that, like us, is not looking for any trouble, just a place to call home. The other day I saw a black wasp fly out of a small hole in the frame of my deck chair, reminding me of the swallows next door that made a nest in the open sewer pipe of the home under construction. You can find at least three wide-eyed frogs perched inside my hose reel box any time you lift the lid. Not for a minute does even the smallest crevice go to waste. There is panic in the air, the hum of a million creatures trying to stay alive.

I am just one of them, hoping my modest savings will last longer in Alabama than in California and that my new home will survive the storms I know are out there.



Jean Ryan, a native Vermonter, lives in Lillian, Alabama. Her stories and essays have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies. Nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize, she has also published a novel, *Lost Sister*. Her debut collection of short stories, *Survival Skills*, was published by Ashland Creek Press and short-listed for a Lambda Literary Award. *Lovers and Loners*, her second story collection, was published in 2017. Her collection of nature essays, *Strange Company*, is available in digital form, paperback and audio.