

Alice

(for Robert)

I always need to know the way home. When I was a child we moved often, and I was rarely in the same school for more than a year or two. In fact, never for more than 17 months and two weeks. At the end of the first day at a new school I would walk straight home by the route I had been taken that morning, not stopping to play or make friends, in case the city had changed, grown new roads or intersections, or twisted away from its previous orientation. And every day after that I would do the same. If I was invited to another child's home I would go, but I would have to walk home first and then to the other house, so that I would have no trouble retracing my path later. I would imagine the other child's house burning down, or being invaded by monsters, so that I kept myself prepared to run home in a panic, guided only by the precise memory I had formed of where to turn and how far I had yet to go.

School led to college and college to work. Bus routes, subways, best of all the distances I could walk. I had trained as a programmer and my third employer let me do almost all my work at home. There was a supermarket two blocks away. I was rarely away for more than half an hour.

Then I met Alice. I remember it like a dream. I was walking home one day, slightly troubled by construction work at the end of my street, which forced me to go most of the way along a parallel street, when she asked me for directions to the laundromat that is right beside my building. It was easiest just to walk along together and as we walked I found myself explaining that I was a bit anxious to get back onto my street. In fact I told her the whole thing, about how since I was a child I had to have an easy way home always in mind. And then she said the marvelous thing. "But it's different for you now." She paused and adjusted the large wicker handbag hanging from her shoulder. "Now you can have maps, and think in terms of compass directions. Look." And she reached into the bag – she had to rummage for twenty five seconds or so – and she showed me a little round compass on a clear plastic stand. "I know where my house is from this part of town, just about that way. And though I haven't been in my childhood home on the east coast for fifteen years I know that from anywhere in the city it's at 97 degrees, east south east. I often think of that house, and I know exactly where it is."

I left her at the laundromat and went on the short distance to my place. The next morning there was a package in my mailbox. A compass. A tiny cheap one, but that was enough. I bought a detailed city map and I spent all of the following Saturday studying it and figuring out the directions home from just about everywhere. Then on Sunday I went for a walk, the first just going for a walk of my life. It was not a very long walk, and it was slow since every two blocks I had to check where I was and point back home. But it was not all in a straight line, and I got to a park I had never seen before, where I read a newspaper on a bench for a while and held out for as long as I could before finding my way back to my building – by a different route that came to my door in the direction that I had never taken before. A new half-block by my front door, though I had seen some of it from my bedroom window.

My walks got longer. I was sometimes gone for an hour. I never felt lost; I always knew exactly how I could get home in a hurry if I wanted to. But knowing this I rarely wanted to. Alice had given me this, and so I got her a present. I didn't know where she lived, or any more of her name than Alice, and so I would drop into the café and the newspaper shop near where we had met, assuming that she would come back there sooner or later. I did not want to loiter and you can only buy so many newspapers and drink so much coffee. So I began to take that half-block as a focus. I would walk in big loops and spirals, approximated by square city blocks, always returning to the Alice point. It was good practice, as I learned to keep two places in mind at once, home and the Alice point. Then, when I had been doing this on and off for four weeks and three days, there she was, wicker bag on her arm, coming out of the newspaper shop. She recognized me and I gave her the present.

A GPS gadget, that listens to invisible satellites and tells you exactly where you are. Not much use unless you also know the coordinates of home. But I knew the coordinates of my building, in fact of my front door and of every room in my apartment, since I had also bought one for myself. Now, I felt, I could go just anywhere, and even if I did not always know how to get home quickly, I would always know exactly where home was. It would be safe in my mind.

At first I did not go far. I took my GPS and I rode on buses, country buses right out of town. I would get off at a random stop determined by the currency exchange rates in the newspaper, and the first thing I would do would be to figure out exactly, really precisely exactly, I was. And in what directions, to a sixtieth of a degree, a navigationally

obsessed crow would fly to get both to my place and to the Alice spot. I went further and further away for longer and longer times. I determined less and less carefully where I would end up and how I would get home. I was free.

Yet something was definitely missing. I could feel that something had been lost. Like the nagging absence of something you do not yet know you have forgotten. I did not see what it was until one day I was at an intersection only a couple of blocks from home, where three roads meet in a confusing absence of right angles, and I could remember what a scary place it had been not very long before. But not just that. I could remember that together with the terror there was an image of how wonderful it would be if the terror was not there, how ecstatic and blissful. And now, without the terror – well it was terror-free, but that did not mean ecstasy or bliss. And without the terror I did not have the glowing image of how wonderful it would be without it. Once I had seen that, everything I had achieved went sour. I walked back the short distance from that intersection, with disillusionment slowly seeping over me. My freedom had been an illusion. I had been pretending I was feeling the thrill of liberty that I had previously dreamt of, but in fact all I felt was neutral. No fear, no joy, just the streets and the directions.

I stayed in my apartment again. It is two weeks later and I am still here. I am not unhappy; it is very calm and easy. When I am not working I sit at my kitchen table and I check directions on my city map. I go to different parts of the apartment and I calculate the exact distances and directions to where I first met Alice. It is very precise. It is safe. I do not mind it.

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