

SHORT FICTION / ESSAYS

Dear Jane

Angela Davis-Gardner

I was home for a visit. My mother and I were eating lunch, tomato aspic and chicken salad, in the dining room. My father was not expected. "At his office, or so he claims," she said, her eyes hooking into mine. I didn't respond; it was the same old story. And I had something to say.

For a while we ate in silence. I looked around the room, the mahogany table and sideboard, Grandmother's silver service, the bone china rimmed with gold. Over everything a patina of calm.

I laid down my fork. "Joel—he still doesn't want children."

"Oh? That's too bad." Her eyes were vague.

"I thought you'd at least care about grandchildren."

She drew herself up, nostrils flared. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"You know very well what it means. You never..."

"I did my best, can't you see that? Can't you see the hell I've lived with all these years?" With a flourish of her arm she indicated the room, as if it were a stage. And she began her monologue, a rehash of the latest affair. In the midst of it, I heard the kitchen door open.

"I should have divorced him years ago." The familiar denouement.

"Why didn't you?" I asked.

She sighed. "Before you children came along, your father was full of fun. So charming." She fixed me with her eyes again. "Then the philandering ... lipstick on the collar, all the clichés. I found letters..."

"I know," I said. "You've told me, lots of times." There was a slight movement in the kitchen; time for him to hear this, the poison she'd poured in my ear, all these years. "Since I was twelve," I added, enunciating clearly. "So—you haven't said—why didn't you divorce him?"

"You children, of course. I had to consider you children."

I must have smiled.

"You wouldn't know how to appreciate it. You've never appreciated a thing I've done for you. Not a damn thing." She stabbed at her aspic, then threw the fork across the room. For a moment we both stared at the red spot on the wall. She began to sob, hiding her face with one hand but I could see her twisted mouth, ugly in grief.

I heard the kitchen door close, and my father's car drive away.

Later that day his letter came, laying out terms, division of property, his wish to be fair.

"This is your fault," she hissed. "He must have overheard."

"Don't blame me—I didn't say all that. And it's what you've always wanted, isn't it?" Over the next few days I watched, superior, even a little contemptuous, as she slid into despair.

My own letter was delivered two years later.

It was, I thought, a happy time. Months of therapy, and Joel agreed to have children. Or child. One at a time, he'd said, grinning, don't press me.

And now we had a baby, a boy, eight months old. He was beautiful, perfect, asleep in my arms as we sat, the three of us, on a couch before the fire.

"I'm happier than I've ever been," I said.

He got up to poke at the fire.

"Aren't you?" I asked, already feeling the chill.

"Actually." He sat back down, staring into the fire. "I don't know how to say this..." And then I knew but I waited all through his talk—he just had to think, breathe, he'd be back, just give him a little time; and I waited through the winter months after he left, he living in a small apartment at first, then a larger one; waited that spring and summer after he said he was "seeing someone."

"You say it first," a friend warned me. But I kept waiting. We waited, my son and I. My son learned to walk; he said his first word, which was not Dada or Mama but Zo for Zero, our dog. Night after night I sat up late with Zero in the living room. One night—it was October, almost Halloween—I was sewing my son's pumpkin costume—I heard a slight rustle, then saw it slide beneath the door, an envelope like a long white tongue.

I ran to the door, shouted, "Come back, you coward," but he was gone, in his car zooming off into the dark. All I could see were taillights, and the impudent wink of his turn signal at the corner.

For a long time after, I moved through the world like a ghost. Only years later, my son in first grade then, did it strike me that I'd talked Joel into everything—living together, marriage, the baby. Trying so hard. Why want someone who didn't want me?

I thought of my mother at the dining room table, the aspic made from Grandmother's recipe, the red splotch on the wall: all the family heirlooms.