

APART FROM YOU

by

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Apart from You

For David, who never doubted

ONE

Elizabeth heard the shuffle of his slippers outside her door and waited for his knock. When it came, it was soft and hesitant, a wordless apology for this disturbance of her privacy.

“Lizzie?” His voice was no bolder. “Are you there, honey?”

“Sure, Dad,” she answered. “Come on in.”

He pushed the bedroom door open to find his daughter writing at her little antique desk. The wood gleamed with polish. Irene and he had never regretted spending what they had for that desk and its delicate companion chair. The furniture had been a present for Elizabeth’s twelfth birthday, and she’d lovingly preserved it for the past eight years.

On the desk was a box of the elegant gray stationery she favored and the several sheets she’d already covered with her cramped script. She laid down her pen at his entrance.

“Writing a letter?” He could see that she was. To Alan, probably, judging by her subtle leaning forward over the pages, as though she feared he would take them up and read them.

“Yes, to Alan.” She sat and looked at her father, neither inviting nor forbidding, merely waiting for an explanation of why he’d come to her room this afternoon.

“I don’t want to bother you if you’re busy. I just thought you might want to come for a little walk with me.” Jonathon paused, uncertain from her noncommittal gaze whether she favored his proposal or not. Did she object to the idea of leaving the cool house for the damp heat outdoors?

He knew that the climate here bothered her more than it did him. Sometimes he suspected that she hated living on the Gulf Coast, that she missed the Midwest more than she was willing to say. Eight months before, she’d taken his news of their impending move with her usual stoical calm. “If it’s really a step up,” she’d said, “then you should take it.” It was, and he had. As far as he could judge, none of them was any the worse for his decision.

“I’m not going very far,” he said, “just up the street a bit. When the paper girl came to collect yesterday, I didn’t have any cash, so I told her I’d bring it to her this afternoon. She can’t live more than a few blocks away.” As though his daughter might require proof of this assertion, Jonathon held out a yellow newspaper receipt on which the paper girl had written her address in large, childish characters.

Jonathon would go alone if Elizabeth didn't want to come with him, but he hoped she did. He'd been writing most of the day, trying to pound out a few more pages of the overdue monograph on Baudelaire. Irene was doing last-minute shopping for the party they were giving that evening. Clara had gone to a movie with a friend. The quiet had been bliss for the first couple of hours, and he'd written five or six pages. But he'd hit a sticking point a little while ago and found that he welcomed the necessity of this errand.

Elizabeth smiled back at him then. He'd known her all her life, of course, but he often found himself surprised at how radically her gap-toothed smile transformed her usually serious face. Did she smile more when she was alone with Alan? He hoped so.

"Sure, Dad," she said, "I'll come with you. I haven't been out all day."

He knew that was true. Even though it was Saturday, she'd risen early, as though it were a weekday and she had to get to her part-time job at the convenience store. Then she'd spent more than three hours cleaning house. The place now looked better than it had for months. Why she felt obliged to act as their maid whenever she was home from college, he had no idea. Her mother loved all this domestic diligence, but Jonathon was disturbed by the grimness with which Elizabeth scrubbed and polished. Did she hate her family's untidy ways so very much? Looking around her immaculate bedroom, he supposed she must.

Clara, the seventeen-year-old, was just the opposite. That girl, he was convinced, had had a previous life as a thoroughly spoiled upper-class brat, possessed of a row of ladies-in-waiting ready to indulge her every selfish whim. Two more dissimilar sisters could scarcely be imagined.

"I'm glad," Jonathon said. "You must have worked awfully hard this morning. It'll do us both good to get out. Just let me put my shoes on, and we'll go."

* * *

The heat was less oppressive than Elizabeth had feared it would be. To the east, a bank of dark clouds was building. High above them as they walked, the tops of the long leaf pines swayed gently in the breeze. These trees had been a marvel to her when she'd first arrived in Mobile. They still were, and she never tired of looking at them.

Her father seemed to be looking mainly at the sidewalk. She supposed he was thinking of his work. Or maybe he was anxious about the party tonight. It was probably important to him, important that the new department chairman and his family make a good impression on their academic guests. Elizabeth was tired from all the housework she'd done, but glad to think she was a help to her parents.

They stopped in front of a sprawling ranch-style house. Her father looked carefully from the numbers on the new mailbox to the slip of paper in his hand. "I guess this is it," he said. "One one three nine. Now let's see if anybody besides the Doberman is at home!" They started up the curving walk through the elaborately landscaped yard, toward the ostentatious double front doors.

A dog's bark answered their ring, but it was the yap of a very small one. As soon as the door was opened, the poodle hurled itself at them, its tiny stump of a tail wagging furiously.

The woman at the door laughed. "Try not to mind Belinda," she said. "She's totally undisciplined, but also totally harmless."

“Is Christie home?” Jonathon asked, smiling back. “I’m Jon Nye, a remiss customer from down the street, and this is my daughter Lizzie. Christie came to collect yesterday, but I had to put her off until today. Lizzie and I were out for a walk, so we thought we’d drop the money by. I hope we’re not disturbing you.”

As the woman held the door for them, Elizabeth saw the quick mutual summation, the mutual approval. “Oh, of course not!” she said. “Please come in.” Once they were all inside, she held out her hand to Jonathon. He shook it with the gentle deliberation Elizabeth had seen him use with other attractive women.

“I’m Nan Culver,” the woman said. She had strikingly large, dark eyes. “Have a seat while I go get Christie. She’s probably in her room watching TV.”

She could just take the money for her, Elizabeth thought. She would have preferred to hand the money to the woman and then continue on their way. Her father, however, seemed quite content to accept the invitation.

Through the mirrored foyer, they were led into a cool spaciousness. Tall potted plants, each a perfect specimen of its kind, were reflected in a polished, brick-red floor. The huge sectional sofa they were waved to was genuine leather, a rich chocolate brown.

Jonathon and Elizabeth sank into it and sat waiting for Nan to return. Her father, Elizabeth could see, was perfectly at ease. He always was in other people’s homes. It was a trait she envied.

From where they sat, she could see an elaborately equipped kitchen and a formal dining room which boasted a table for eight. Elizabeth wished she could be so bold as to walk over and inspect both the table and the magnificent Persian carpet beneath it.

She looked over at her father, wondering what his reaction to their surroundings was. He gave her a slow wink, showing her that he found this conspicuous consumption amusing. Elizabeth felt mainly that the whole was rather less comfortable than the Culvers’ decorator had intended it to be. She searched her mind for a word to describe it all. Then she had it. Like its young mistress, the house was somehow self-conscious. It seemed to be waiting for an expected compliment.

Elizabeth wanted to share this observation with her father, thinking he would probably appreciate her *mot juste*. But she couldn’t express her thoughts out loud, as their hostess might reappear at any moment. So she merely stroked little Belinda while she studied the dark red floor, trying to decide whether the surface was tile or that new wonder, no-wax vinyl. Whichever it was, it was undeniably beautiful.

The soft slap of Nan’s sandals heralded her return. “I don’t know where that child can have gone off to,” she said. “Maybe she went for a bike ride. When you rang the doorbell, I was in the back bedroom doing some sewing, so I didn’t see her leave. She does that to me sometimes — goes out without telling me when she’ll be back, I mean.” She looked at Jonathon, giving him a you-know-how-it-is-for-us-parents smile. There was no real exasperation or worry in her voice. Elizabeth couldn’t be certain, but she thought the scent the woman was wearing had just been applied.

Nan eased her small, trim body onto the cushions of a rattan chaise lounge. She evidently hoped they would stay and visit. She bent one tanned leg just enough to reveal the sensuous curve of her back thigh muscles. Beneath the edge of her brief white shorts, the merest bit of pale green lace was visible.

“Christie’s my only one,” she continued with unexpected openness, “from my first marriage. Frank and I don’t have any children yet. It gets lonely for Christie here

sometimes. Back in Minneapolis, we lived in a much smaller place, in a very different sort of neighborhood.” She looked away for just a moment. “There, it seemed as though practically every house around us had kids near her age. But here, there seem to be mainly older children, like you.” She nodded at Elizabeth, who wasn’t sure whether she should be offended or not. It had been quite some time since anyone else had referred to her as a child.

“At least she’s found one friend, another ten-year-old. That’s Kristen, from two doors down. She’s probably with her now, in fact.” She laughed, very naturally. “That’s funny, isn’t it? Christie and Kristen. At least they don’t *look* alike, or things would really get confusing! You’ve seen Christie, of course. She’s a little brunette squirt, like me. Kristen is tall and blonde.”

Elizabeth was curious about this woman’s history. Was she divorced or a widow? She couldn’t be much past thirty. It was plain that her daughter was not the only lonely member of this small family.

“Your house is beautiful,” Elizabeth said. She could think of no other remark that would be sure to please. “I was just admiring your floor. Is it tile or vinyl?”

“Lizzie!” Jonathon said, embarrassed.

Nan didn’t seem to mind the question at all. “Oh, it’s tile,” she said. “That was Frank’s choice. To tell the truth, I’d just as soon have no-wax vinyl. It’s softer to stand on and easier to clean. I feel sorry for the maid, having to polish all this. And if Frank and I ever have a baby, I’m afraid he’ll be forever falling and hurting himself.”

Frank probably doesn’t want a baby, Elizabeth thought. A baby would dig in these fancy plants and wet on this fancy couch.

Nan suddenly brightened. “Would you like to see the rest of the house? That is, if you’re not in a rush.”

Jonathon pulled his large body from the depths of the couch. “I’d enjoy that a lot,” he said. “We’re in no hurry at all.”

On their way down the hall toward the bedrooms, Elizabeth noticed how closely her father was following Nan. She was sorry she hadn’t found some excuse for hurrying them home. Her mother would be back soon, going crazy preparing for the party.

With its elaborate pink and white decor and studied neatness, Christie’s bedroom looked like something in a furniture store showroom, ready for the photographer to capture its perfection for the catalog. The maid was thorough indeed.

The little dog had trotted eagerly down the hall ahead of them. Once inside the room, she jumped on Christie’s bed and lay with one hind leg lifted, waiting for a pat on her apricot belly. In the entire room, she was the only thing that seemed fully real.

“I told you that dog was spoiled!” Nan laughed. “Naughty Belinda!” she said to the dog. “Can’t you behave for company?” She made no move to dislodge the little creature, however, and turned to them with another of her pretty smiles. “Actually, this bed is as much Belinda’s as it is Christie’s. They sleep together every night. Frank doesn’t approve, but Christie and I have had Belinda since Christie was three years old. They’re inseparable.”

“And rightly so,” said Jonathon. “My brother Will and I had a cocker spaniel when we were kids. We called him Cinders. He used to sleep with us, too, fleas and all. It nearly broke my heart when that dog died.” He put his hand down to oblige Belinda with a scratch behind the ears. She caught his fingers between her teeth and worried them

enthusiastically. If the play was at all painful, Jonathon gave no sign of that. He just grinned and tumbled the little dog around on the spread while Nan looked on approvingly.

Elizabeth turned to inspect the rest of the room. In the corner was the television set Nan had thought her daughter might be watching. It was large and fine, better than any the Nyes had ever owned. In the bookcase was a row of beautifully bound children's classics. On the shelf above these were two indications that Christie could also indulge her own tastes and loves.

The first was a collection of miniature horses. Three of them were obviously expensive, of glass, ivory, and jade. They were outnumbered by a whole herd of cheaper ones of wood and plastic. One was of terra cotta, with a little halter of bright blue yarn. All of them stood familiarly mingled, their young owner apparently oblivious to the discrepancies in their economic backgrounds.

With the pretense of examining the horses more closely, Elizabeth leaned to look at the framed photograph beside them. Astride the new motorcycle sat a lean, black-haired young man, dressed in blue jeans, a T-shirt, and sneakers. Behind him, clutching his waist, was perched a dark-haired little girl, her face alight with excitement.

Nan saw her looking at the photo. She answered the question Elizabeth didn't know how to ask.

"That's my first husband, Eddie — and Christie, of course. She was five then. You can see how they both loved that bike." There was a pause. "He was killed on it a year and a half after that picture was taken. He was on his way home from work. It was winter, and a truck slid into him at a stop sign." There was another, longer pause. "I thank God every day that Christie wasn't with him when it happened."

Elizabeth looked at the woman, speechless, hoping her sympathy would show in her eyes. Nan saw only her memories. She stood blinking back tears, her mouth tight with her effort not to cry, her slender arms pressed beneath her breasts. Then she regained control.

"Well," she said, her voice husky with the tears she'd just fought back, "you wanted to see the house, not hear my life story!"

There was no motorcycle in the large portrait photograph in the master bedroom, and no laughing little girl. There was only Nan Culver, resplendent in a cream-colored wool suit and pearls, and her impeccably tailored present husband. Elizabeth thought she saw tenderness in the lined face, concern for the beautiful young woman whose hand he held, but nothing at all of joy. She wondered anew at these people's histories.

Between the bedroom and its private bath, Nan stopped at an enormous closet, which she threw open for their inspection. She'd make a great real estate agent, Elizabeth thought, but what makes her think we want to see their clothes? The intimacy was making her uncomfortable.

"You can see who has the clothes in *this* family!" Nan said. She seemed gratified as Jonathon ran a respectful hand over the long row of expensive suits and sports jackets and then past the great mass of beautifully laundered shirts. Elizabeth felt only revulsion. She knew that her father considered himself well-equipped with two suits, four jackets, a few pairs of dress slacks, and maybe six or seven good shirts. What job or vanity could possibly require a wardrobe like this one?

The protracted tour ended back in the living room. “Can you stay for a bit?” Nan asked. The question was almost a plea. “Could I offer you a drink? I was just about to have one.”

Jonathon looked at his watch. Elizabeth could see he was tempted by the prospect of another hour or so of their attractive neighbor’s company, as well as by the first-rate liquor she would be sure to serve.

“Dad, don’t you think we’d better go? Mom’s probably home by now, and you know she’ll want our help.”

Yes, Jonathon knew. An hour from now, Irene would be half frantic, bitching about the state of their aging furniture, worrying that she’d forgotten some essential food or beverage, and moaning that she never had anything decent to wear. This last was true, but it wasn’t his fault. Irene hated shopping, complaining that nothing ever looked right. Given how large her hips were, that was also true. Jonathon loved giving parties, but the countdowns were murder.

He shrugged his shoulders, a gesture of annoyance and defeat. “You’re right, Lizzie. We need to get going.”

His affability returned for Nan. “This is awfully short notice,” he said with his most charming smile, “but if you and your husband aren’t busy this evening, my wife and I would be delighted if you could come by a little later.”

I wouldn’t be so sure about Mom’s reaction, Elizabeth thought.

“We’re having a party tonight,” Jonathon explained. “It’s nothing fancy, just a few people from the university. It took us a while to settle in after I took over the chairmanship of the Modern Languages department last winter, so this is a belated housewarming party. Would you be able to make it?”

Nan’s pleasure at the invitation was plain, but so was her hesitation. Elizabeth imagined that her husband might be less than enthusiastic about an unexpected Saturday night engagement at an unknown neighbor’s house.

“I would love to come!” Nan said. “But if I did, I’d be by myself. Frank’s in Birmingham on a business trip, and he won’t be back until Monday evening.”

Was she blushing? Elizabeth couldn’t be sure.

“Then there’s Christie. I can’t leave her by herself, and I don’t know how I could possibly get a sitter on such short notice.”

Babysitting had been Elizabeth’s main source of income when she was in high school. During her two years at college, she’d often missed those children. She was on the verge of offering her own services when Nan spoke again.

“Wait, I know what! Christie’s been after me for days to let her spend the night at Kristen’s. The Randalls have a new pup tent, and the girls want to camp out in the back yard. I told them they’d get eaten alive by the mosquitoes, but they insist. Sometimes kids just have to learn the hard way, you know.”

“It sounds like a lot of fun to me,” Elizabeth said, “at least for a pair of ten-year-olds.” She and Clara had never had a pup tent. An old blanket over a clothesline, the ends secured with rocks, had been the best they could manage outdoors. In rainy weather and in the winter, they’d loved playing under a sheet-draped card table. How very long ago that seemed, both the fun and her sister’s friendship.

“Oh, I’m sure it will be,” Nan said. “Those two seem to have a good time no matter what they’re doing. And Nickie — that’s Kristen’s mother — always lets them bake

chocolate chip cookies. So staying there tonight would please Christie no end. It's just a matter of seeing whether or not it's okay with Nickie." A pause. "Could you possibly wait while I call her? I don't want to keep you in suspense."

"Sure," said Jonathon, "go ahead and call. We'll wait."

Other men carried handkerchiefs in their trouser pockets. Jonathon always carried a miniature notebook and a pencil stub. Elizabeth had once commented on this. "You'd be surprised at how useful they are," he'd said. "Sometimes it's just a phone number to be recorded, but sometimes it's a flash of inspiration." He pulled the notebook and pencil from his pocket now. While Nan was in the kitchen telephoning her neighbor, he wrote down his name, address, and phone number for her. As an afterthought, he added his wife's name.

Nickie Randall was at home. No, she and Bob had no plans for the evening, and yes, Christie would be welcome to spend the night. Kristen would be thrilled.

Nan came almost skipping back to them. "She said it's just fine with her. They're having fried chicken, which is Christie's idea of pheasant under glass, so she won't miss her old mom one bit!"

"Then that's settled," said Jonathon, his own pleasure evident. He handed her the notebook page. "Here's all the information you'll need. Things should get underway around seven, but people will be drifting in and out all evening, probably, so don't feel rushed." Again, Elizabeth noticed how close he stood to the woman.

"I almost forgot!" Nan said, touching his arm. "You came to give Christie her money, but I have no idea how much it is. She's such an efficient little businesswoman that she doesn't let me have anything to do with her billing. Can I let you know how much it is when I get there tonight?"

"Of course," said Jonathon. His fingertips brushed hers. He seemed to have forgotten that the carefully filled out receipt was in his pocket. "You just come and collect later."