

The Ladies - Elizabeth Bear

Quincy, Massachusetts, February 1797

Mrs. John Adams looked to her sewing. The sealed letter she ignored with such presence of intention rested on a round wooden table beside her as she tugged thread taut, knotted, and snipped it with the scissors hung on a ribbon around her neck.

She knew the round cramped handwriting that addressed the folded paper and the seal that closed it, and although she would not glance at it, she knew without lifting the seal what it contained. The postmark was Philadelphia, and the color of the wax was a signal long arranged.

She felt it as if it were no mere note, but the soft-spoken, ginger-haired author himself at her elbow, valiantly refraining from clearing his throat. It would be easier if he were here, Mrs. Adams thought, as she measured another length of thread.

It would have been easier to hear this news in person, from the Secretary of State's lips, in Mr. Jefferson's own gentle lisp.

But perhaps it was just that the news come in a letter. Letters of her own had started all this foolishness, after all. She had no-one to blame but herself.

Quincy, Massachusetts, May 7, 1776

. . . I cannot say that I think you are very generous to the ladies; for, whilst you are proclaiming peace and good-will to men, emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives.

But you must remember that arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken; and, notwithstanding all your wise laws and maxims, we have it in our power, not only to free ourselves, but to subdue our masters, and without violence, throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet . . .

-- Abigail Smith Adams, from a letter to John Adams

Monticello February 5.96

Dear Madam

It is with some trepidation that I take pen in hand to broach this subject, but as I have before me the example of your own courage in remonstrating with me on principles that you held dear, I can offer you no lesser respect. I will seem to make you a shocking proposition, dear Madam, but I must beg you hear me out in deference to the love I bear your husband and your self. I write to you as your friend and not in my capacity as Secretary of State.

The course of events might have followed rather differently had I remained in Paris with Mr. Franklin. But the example of that failed revolution lies before us -- with all its madness of "la terreur n'est autre chose que la justice prompte, sévère, inflexible" -- and we have seen now what happens when the state falls to the mob and the coercion of monarchist neighbors. If our own fragile republic is to remain unified in the

face of the British threat, factionalism and the monarchist tendencies of some must be laid by.

Having endured one war, I harbor now no desire ever to witness another.

You wrote to me with such passion during the late convention of Philadelphia as to make me a convert to your cause of female emancipation, and of course my daughter Mary shared with me your correspondence to her. But although our labors to see suffrage extended to your gentle sex have borne fruit, and with Mr. Adams' sometimes grudging assistance we have seen a bill of the inalienable rights of man included in the body of the constitution, the position of your sex may not be regarded as secure until we have demonstrated in practice as well as principle the gentle strength of your will.

And fear not, dear Madam, that I should in any wise reveal to Mr. Adams how directly your letters influenced me, as I know how dearly he opposed your efforts toward equality. Also, I profess myself in your sincere debt, for I know very well whose temperate persuasion brought Mr. Adams (and the Massachusetts delegation with him) to support my proposed bill of rights. Ours was not so unlikely an alliance after all.

But there are those who are not so sanguine as to the benefit of our great accomplishment, and who hold suffrage for women and free discourse of the press as hazardous portals to sedition and revolution. It would be not amiss to demonstrate the resilience of our own State in the face the failures of France, and the threats from monarchist powers abroad who find in our noble experiment an incitement to their oppressed.

Let me speak plainly. In the interests of precedent, President Washington will not seek re-election to a third term. Mr. Adams, I do not doubt, plans to run again, and will not be contented with the vice-president's share this time, though you might know more of that than should I.

I shall make a bid for president as well -- if I am not put out of place by Mr. Burr -- and you may tell your husband you have it from me in the spirit of great friendship.

Simply put, my proposition is thus. Dear Madam, you are eloquent out of proportion to your sex. It is my belief that to secure the position of your fair sisters in our young republic, and to demonstrate and ensure your power, you must run for President in opposition to your husband and myself.

Th: Jefferson

Quincy, Massachusetts, February 1797

The needle tugged thread taut at the edge of the buttonhole. Mrs. Adams lifted the strand to her lips and bit, forgetting her scissors until the pain of worn teeth reminded her. She set the shirt in her lap and stroked the fine linen. It would be her husband's inaugural shirt.

One way or another.

Oh, how they had argued. First she with Mr. Jefferson, that no wife should -- publicly -- offer her husband anything but support, no matter that she might speak her mind in private. But the Secretary of State had at length convinced her. Jefferson could be profoundly convincing, when he cared to, and having used that talent for her own ends Mrs. Adams knew the truth of it.

Another truth was that she owed him a tremendous debt, and his arguments were very tidy. John's Federalism was all very well, but the other major power in the Federalist party, Alexander Hamilton,

given reign, would do no less than erode the rights that Jefferson had fought for, and that an emergent two-party system -- Adams and the Federalists on one side, Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans on the other -- and in the end he convinced her.

And then Mrs. Adams and Mr. Jefferson had remonstrated more or less gently with Mr. Adams.

John had brought his own objections to bear. First, that there was no party for Mrs. Adams; second, that she and John would divide any Federalist vote, leaving the election to Mr. Jefferson and the Republicans.

Jefferson countered the first with the proclamation that he proposed a great experiment, which must prove whether a woman -- in the perfect privacy of her ballot -- would vote her sex, or her husband's politics. "Perhaps a Women's Party will grow up to support Mrs. Adams. And John," Jefferson said, gangling elbows pressing his coat to his sides as he leaned forward, "do you doubt that any of us could manage the job?"

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all persons are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. -- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among People, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

-- Thomas Jefferson, declaration adopted July 4, 1776

Of course it had not all gone smoothly. But perhaps Mr. Jefferson had foreseen that as well. Fortunately for Mrs. Adams' peace of mind, she was not expected to campaign -- it was considered gauche in a presidential election, which should be decided on the demonstrated abilities of the candidates -- but that did not mean there were those who would not campaign for her.

And against her.

She ceased reading the papers. Nabby, her namesake and eldest daughter, kept track of the news and reported back as needful. "The revolutionary spirit has infected us," she told her mother, with her cheeks quite flushed. "Women march for you in Boston, Mama."

Mrs. Adams set aside her embroidery hoop and smoothed the tablecloth she was working over her knees. A strange courting excitement filled her, as if she were young and John were seeking her hand again, but she calmed her face and said, "A few women in Boston do not an election make."

Nabby bounced on the lip of her chair, unladylike. "Not a few. Upwards of a thousand, and many over their husband's protests. And the paper says they wear ribbon sashes embroidered with your name."

Philadelphia, December 14.96

Dear Madam

The college of electors have received the will of the men and women of their several states and in their turn cast their own votes. Here at the Capitol we have awaited the arrival of the certificates and the disposition of our fates with, I have no doubt, no less trepidation than you must have experienced at your pretty farm in Quincy. If there is no majority, it will go to the House of Representatives to decide, but I do not think that will be the case this time.

In your last letter, you intimated that if you should defeat your husband, you would step aside in his favor. That in the face of war between France and Britain, you felt it vital to show your support for him as his friend and helpmeet. While I applaud your devotion to felicity, you must not.

Had I been in France, had I not heeded your words, had the constitution been differently written, we would not have found ourselves at this crossroads. But here we are, and here you are, and it is I think our incumbency to look unflinching forward to generations to come.

I do not know if Mr. Adams has written you already, either as your husband or in his capacity as vice president, but as I intimated, we have received the electoral certificates. The second president and vice president of the United States of American have been chosen, and it waits only a few weeks for that choice to be revealed.

Of course it will be some time before the official opening and tabulation of the votes in February, when we will know for certain who has won. But rumor flies on swifter wings than any post, and I have heard some tally of the number of women sent to serve among the electors, and the number of Federalists.

I may say with reasonable expectation of certitude that the second president of this republic will not bear the name of Jefferson.

As such, the letter informing you of the house's decision will be executed by my hand as secretary of state.

Not as secretary but as your friend, I will see it sent swiftly, and to your notice. And for whatever small kindness I may yet manage, Madam, I shall seal it with red wax for the mistress, or blue wax for the master of the house, that you may have advice of the contents.

Of course, I may offer no speculation now what that letter may contain. But again, I beg you, think on the republic and consider carefully whether you shall efface yourself, should the contest be decided in your favor. As I have taken up your argument for suffrage, I pray you carry on with the strength of your convictions if you are rewarded with the admiration of free women, and perhaps in some small regard the wisest of the men. The republic lies before us. Let us begin as we mean to go on.

You have called me persuasive. Allow me to persuade you now. Surely, your domestic harmony -- and the great love and friendship between yourself and Mr. Adams -- can withstand any eventuality.

What today we choose may echo.

Th: Jefferson

Quincy, Massachusetts, February 1797

Abigail thrust her needle through the linen, and reached for her scissors again. She snipped, considered, and laid the shirt aside over the table, beside the letter.

After a moment, she stood shakily, and took up the envelope. Her thumb stroked the red wax seal.

"John," she called, walking firm of stride toward her husband's study, "a letter's come from Tom."

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